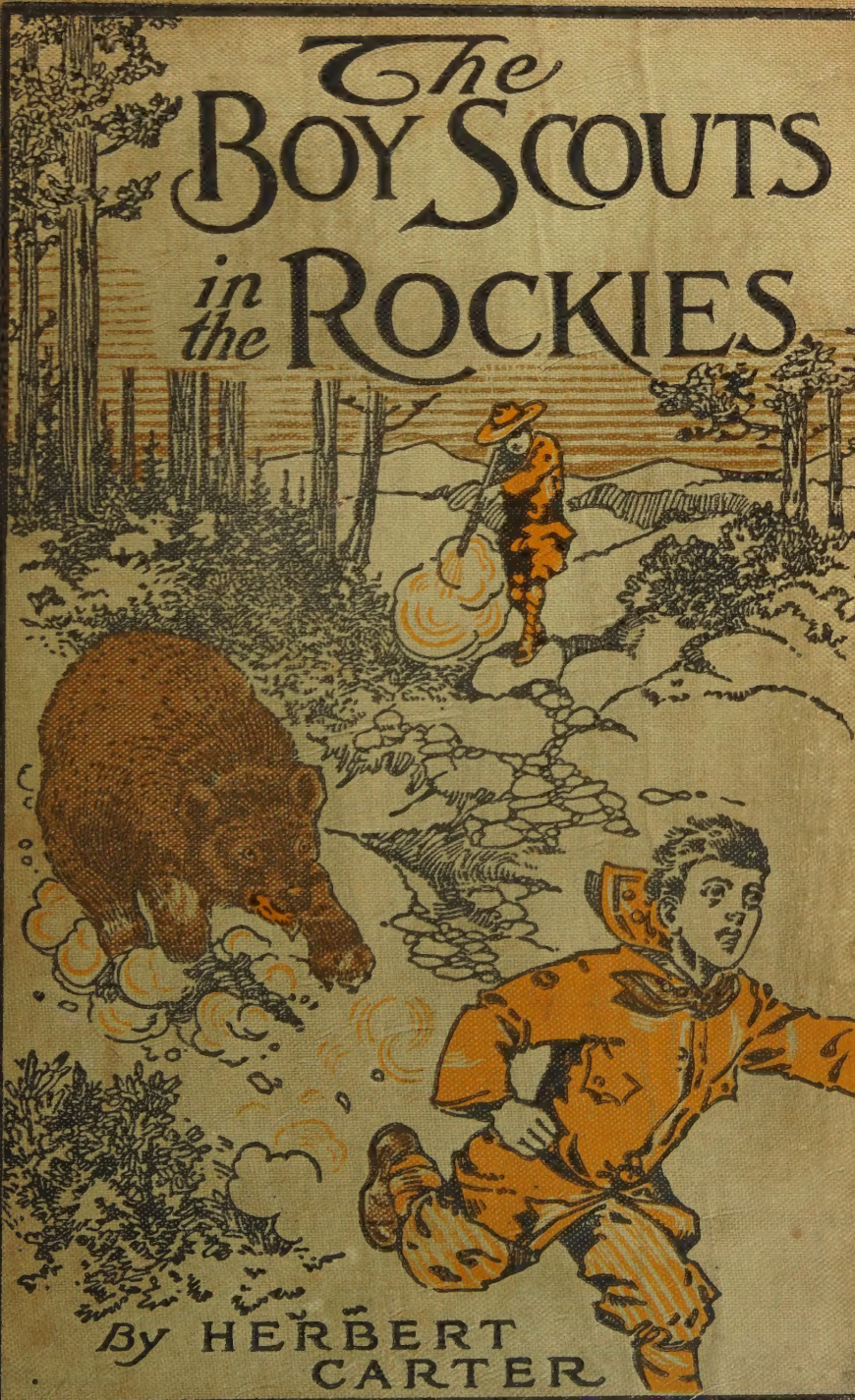
The BOY SCOUTS in the ROCKIES



By HERBERT CARTER

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The stubborn jack stood, with his sturdy legs braced like steel, while the taut rope told that Smithy must be dangling at the other end.

The Boy Scouts In the Rockies

OR

The Secret of the Hidden Silver Mine

By HERBERT CARTER

Author of "The Boy Scouts First Camp Fire," "The Boy Scouts in the Blue Ridge," "The Boy Scouts on the Trail," "The Boy Scouts Through the Big Timber" "The Boy Scouts in the Maine Woods."

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THE BOY SCOUTS IN THE ROCKIES.

THE BOY SCOUTS IN THE ROCKIES

CHAPTER I.

PERILS OF THE MOUNTAIN TRAIL.

"How is the cripple crowd coming on these days? Hello! Step Hen, any more snake bites? Hope you're not limping with that other leg, now?"

"I should say not, Thad. But I'm always going to believe you did a lot to keep the poison from getting into my system, when you sucked that wound."

"And how about your game limb, Giraffe—was it the right, or the left you bruised so badly on the stones when you fell?"

"The left one, Thad; but thank goodness it's healing up just prime, now. That magic salve did the business in great shape, I tell you."

"Allan, I notice that you still have a halt once

in a while. That old bear trap sure took a nasty grip on your leg, didn't it, though?"

"It gave me an ugly pinch, Mr. Scout Master; and only for the fact of the springs being so weak and rusty that the owners had abandoned the trap, I might have been lame for three months. The witch hazel liniment you rubbed on helped a lot."

"Well, I'm glad to see you're all such a grateful lot, considering the little I was able to do for you. It's sure a pleasure to be patrol leader and assistant scoutmaster to such a wide-awake lot of boys as we have in the Silver Fox Patrol. Don't you think so, Toby Smathers?"

Thad Brewster turned a smiling face upon the sole man of the party, a genuine woods-ranger, such as the Government employs to look after the great forest reservations in the region of the Rocky Mountains, and the Coast, away up in the Northwest region.

"Wall, it strikes me they're a purty lively lot of scouts, all right; and lucky at that to hev a leader as leads, and holds the reins tight over 'em. And I'm glad myself to be guide to such a hefty bunch. That's what I'm asayin', Mr. Scout Master," the party addressed replied.

Outside of the guide there were just eight lads in the party; and from the fact that various parts of their attire suggesed the well known khaki uniform which all Boy Scouts wear, the world around

it was evident that these young fellows belonged to such an organization.

This was the exact fact, since they had come from far-away Cranford in an Eastern State, and were known as the Silver Fox Patrol of Cranford Troop; there being another patrol known as the Eagles, mustered in during the late winter.

Thad Brewster was the patrol leader; he was also a First Class Scout, and had qualified for the position of Assistant Scout Master, receiving his certificate from Headquarters many moons before.

Second in charge came Allan Hollister, a Maine boy, who had had considerable actual experience in wood's life, and to whom the rest of the patrol naturally turned whenever a knotty problem faced them during an outing.

The exceedingly fat and good-natured youth was Bumpus Hawtree, bugler of the troop, even though just now he was minus the instrument on which he was accustomed to sound the various calls, such as "reveille," "assembly," "taps," and so on, the most popular being the second, as it was usually associated with meals. Bumpus had been looked upon as the real tenderfoot scout, up to recently; but having become lost in the big timber recently, he had acquitted himself so splendidly, as recorded in the preceding volume, that his mates now regarded him as one who had been keeping his light under a bushel.

Then there was Bob White, otherwise Robert White Quail, a Southern boy, warm of heart, a faithful friend, and upon whom the leader could always depend in emergencies; Step Hen Bingham, whose real name of course was Stephen, but upon appearing at school for the first time he had insisted that it was pronounced as though made up of two syllables; Davy Jones, an athletic lad; Giraffe, really Conrad, Stedman, but given the significant nick-name because of a habit he had of stretching an exceedingly long neck most outrageously; and last but far from least, a dudish looking boy who at home answered when they called him Edmund Maurice Travers Smith; but among his playmates he was known simply as "Smithy."

These Boy Scouts had seen some pretty lively times during the past year or so, down in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, where they visited the former home of Bob White, and found themselves mixed up with the moonshiners of that wild, inhospitable region; and later on up in Maine, where they had gone partly on business for Thad's adopted father and guardian, and to enjoy an outing, with a little hunting thrown in.

It happened that here among the pine woods of Maine, they were instrumental in recovering some valuable bonds and other papers that had been stolen from a bank, and for which a large reward had been offered. With this money in the treasury

of the troop, they were able to lay out a great trip to the Rocky Mountain region for the following summer. As the money really belonged to the eight lads individually, they felt justified in using it in this manner; for the second patrol had only been formed after the Cranford boys learned what glorious times the Silver Foxes were having right along.

One guide who had been hired had gone off with a party of big-horn hunters, who lured him with better pay, and the other had been taken down sick; so it came that the boys actually started toward the mountains without a convoy, their tents and camp-duffle being loaded on a couple of comical pack mules known as Mike and Molly, which animals afforded more or less amusement and excitement from time to time.

They had heard of Toby Smathers, and only good words. In coming to this particular region they had hoped to run across the ranger, and secure him for their service while in the valleys and mountains; for he was said to be patrolling the big timber country, on which some thieving lumbermen were suspected of having set envious eyes.

And by great good luck the boys had happened to meet up with Toby, after passing through a great variety of thrilling experiences, connected with the hunt for the tenderfoot who had "gone out to find his bear." And as the ranger was able to engage with them for the balance of their stay

in the mountains, Thad and his companions now felt that they need hesitate no longer, but might strike boldly into the heart of the Rockies.

They had various objects in wanting to come out to this far distant region. Several who had the hunting fever burning in their veins, had sighed for a glimpse of big game, grizzlies and such; then another, who was rapidly being taken with the photographic craze, being Davy Jones, expressed a wish to snap off wild animals and birds in their native haunts, the famous big horn sheep for instance taking one of his amazing plunges over a precipice; Smithy was interested in wild flowers, and had heard great stories concerning the pretty ones that were to be found out here; and then there were several others who yearned for excitement in any shape or style, so long as it thrilled their pulses—which was the natural boy spirit, always feeding on action.

Some days had passed since the coming of the guide, and the breaking up of the camp at the foot of the noisy rapids, where three of the boys had remained while their companions were off for days, tracking the wandering Bumpus.

They had started into the mountains, and were at the time this conversation took place surrounded by the wildest scenery that any of them had ever looked upon.

The trail led along precipitous paths, often with

a wall of rock on one side, and a yawning abyss on the other, down which the boys could look and see trees growing that seemed to be dwarfed, but which the guide assured them were of fairly respectable size.

As a rule the scouts were a rollicking set, full of jokes, and even playing innocent little tricks upon each other; but somehow the grandeur of the scenery, as well as the dangers of that mountain trail, rather stilled their spirits. Thad had also taken pains to warn them that practical pranks would be out of order during their stay in the mountains. He had heard of several that had turned out tragedies; and wanted to carry no ill tidings home to dear old Cranford, when the patrol set their faces that way.

Step Hen had one trait from which nothing ever seemed capable of breaking him. He was exceedingly careless by nature, and forever misplacing things that belonged to him. And the fun of it was, that he could never see how the fault lay with himself; but kept bewailing the misfortune that always picked him out as a victim; just as though some invisible little imp were haunting his footsteps forever, and watching for opportunities to hide his belongings in the most unheard-of places. It did not matter that they were usually found just where Step Hen had himself dropped them in a moment of absent-mindedness; he would

grumble to himself, and observe his companions suspiciously, as though he really believed they had been playing a little joke upon him after all.

Thad had even lain awake nights, figuring on how the other might be radically cured of this failing; for Step Hen had many admirable traits of character, and it seemed a great pity that his record as a scout should be marred by so tenacious a fault. But up to the present the scoutmaster had not been able to build up a scheme that promised to effect a cure. And every once in a while the complaining voice of Step Hen might be heard in the land, wondering "where in Sam Hill that knife of mine has disappeared to; last time I had it I was mighty careful to put it away in the sheath; and now it's gone like magic. Who sneaked it off me, tell me that? Funny how it's only *my* things that disappear all the time. Oh! is that it sticking up there in the tree, Giraffe? You say you saw me put it there? Well, I don't remember the least thing about that. Guess you must have been dreaming; but of course I'm glad to find it again. I wish people would use their own knives."

Perhaps, some time or other Step Hen might be given a lesson that would make so lasting an impression on him that he would begin to see the absurdity of being careless. Thad often felt that he would like to help the good work along, if ever the chance arrived.

Smithy was more than a little curious in his way. He possessed a kindly nature, too, and had made friends with Mike, one of the pack mules. Often in the goodness of his heart the dude scout would walk alongside the burden bearer, talking to him, and patting the animal's nose. Sometimes Mike resented these attentions, for he was only a mule after all, and all scouts looked alike according to his manner of thinking.

Smithy was walking there now, having the leading rope that was connected with Mike in his hand; in fact, he had wrapped it around his wrist absent-mindedly. And as he talked confidingly to the animal, he was also engaged in rubbing Mike's nose. Twice the mule had plainly given him to understand that he preferred to be let alone while staggering along these mountain trails, bearing that big pack on his sturdy back; but Smithy was really thinking about some wonderfully beautiful wild flowers he had seen clinging to the face of a precipice further back, and wishing he might be so lucky as to get hold of such a prize; so that he paid no attention to the impatient thrust from the mule's nose.

It happened just then that Thad, Allan and the guide were in the advance. Something engrossed their attention, and they were holding an earnest talk-fest among themselves. Had it been otherwise, Toby Smathers, who knew mule nature like

a book, must surely have warned the kindly Smithy that Mike was in a most irritable frame of mind, and that he would do well to leave him severely alone for the present.

Behind Smithy and Mike came Davy Jones, carrying his little camera, and looking for new worlds to conquer. He had snapped off the procession several times, and of course the mules always occupied posts of honor in the pictures. Back of him Bob White and Step Hen were sauntering along, telling stories, and observing things in general; after them came Bumpus, puffing and blowing with the exertion; while Giraffe brought up the rear, leading the other pack animal, known as Molly; and just about as full of tricks as Mike ever dreamed of being.

Thad was in the act of pointing toward the valley, glimpses of which they could obtain from their lofty position, when he heard a tremendous outcry from the rear that gave him a bad shock. Turning like a flash, the scoutmaster discovered that one of the patrol was missing. There was no need to ask who it was, for there he saw Mike, the pack mule, with his feet pushed out to keep himself from being pulled over the edge of the shelf of rock; while the taut rope told that poor Smithy must be dangling at the other end, with an ugly fall threatening him if by chance the rope came loose from his wrist, where he had wrapped it!

CHAPTER II.

TIDINGS OF THE LOST MINE.

"HELP! help! Smithy's tumbled over the edge of the precipice!

That was Step Hen shouting. He had happened to be the nearest one to the unfortunate scout, when Mike gave the other an impatient shove with his nose, that made Smithy lose his balance, and topple over the brink.

Thad never lost a second, but went on the jump toward the spot where the stubborn jack stood, with his sturdy little legs braced like steel, as though determined not to be pulled over just because Smithy had stepped off the trail.

Reaching the spot, Thad threw himself down on his face. He could peer over the edge, and see the dangling scout. Smithy was squirming at a tremendous rate, doubtless terrified at the sudden mishap that had overtaken him, and which came when he was dreaming of other things.

"Stop wriggling that way, Smithy!" called the patrol leader; "it won't do any good, and may shake the rope loose from your wrist! Here, try and get hold with your other hand; and grip it

good and fast. We'll have you up in a jiffy, never fear!"

"Oh! Thad!" gasped the poor fellow, whose face was as white as chalk when he turned it appealingly upward; nevertheless Smithy had learned the quality of obedience, and particularly when he heard the acting scoutmaster speak; so that almost mechanically he groped around with his free hand until his fingers came in contact with the taut rope, when they closed upon it tenaciously; just as a drowning man will cling to the first thing he clutches that seems to hold out a single ray of hope.

"Let me help," said a quiet voice close to Thad's ear; and he knew that it was Allan who spoke—Allan, always self-possessed and cool, even in the most trying conditions.

Thad was only too glad to have an assistant, for he could never have lifted the imperiled lad alone, since Smithy was no light weight; and did not know enough to help himself by digging the toes of his boots into crevices of the rocks, so as to ease the terrific strain on his arms.

"Hold on tight, Smithy; it's all right, and you're not going to fall, understand that now. So, up you come, my boy! Another pull like that, and we'll sure have you on deck again. Easy now with that rope back there; Step Hen, hold to the mule, and keep him quiet, will you?"

Thad said all this in a reassuring, matter-of-fact

tone, that was better calculated to put confidence into the faint heart of Smithy than anything else could. Step Hen and Davy Jones caught hold of the obstreperous Mike, almost frantic because of these strange carryings-on, and held him tight, so that he might not interfere with the critical work of rescue.

And so Smithy was finally pulled over the edge. Once Thad managed to secure a grip of the collar of his scout coat, he knew everything was serene, for that khaki cloth was firm and sound, and capable of bearing almost any strain.

The rescued scout sprawled on the shelf, panting hard. His face was still ghastly white, for Smithy lacked greatly in fortitude, and needed building up as much as the other tenderfoot, Bumpus, had, before his adventures in the big timber, that had gone so far to raise him in the estimation of his chums.

"Whew! that was a close shave!" exclaimed Giraffe, from the rear, where he had been holding on the other mule with more or less difficulty; because, when Molly discovered that her mate was in some sort of panic, she also wanted to frisk around, and cut up, after the way of mules in general.

Step Hen and Davy Jones were poking their heads over the edge, curious to know just what

Smithy had been saved from. The former turned, and grinned.

"Guess you might have been bruised some, Smithy, if you'd gone on down;" he remarked; "but there's a big shelf that was waiting to grab you, just five feet under your toes. But as you didn't know that, and thought the drop was half a mile, more or less, I don't blame you for feeling shaky about it."

Smithy recovered sufficiently to insist on crawling to the edge, and also peering over. When he really found that what Step Hen said was the truth, it seemed to annoy him, strange to say.

"Now, isn't that provoking," he declared, in his precise way of talking that he had learned from his maiden aunts; "why, if I had only been aware of that circumstance, what an amount of mental suffering it would have saved me. When a fellow gets such a fright as that, he likes to know that it was worth while."

The journey was soon resumed; but Thad saw to it that some one else besides Smithy held the leading rope of the tricky Mike. Perhaps the mule might never afterwards try the same game; and then again he was liable to break out in a new direction; for there was a little demon in that wicked eye of his, Thad thought.

Already they were on the downward grade. By the time night arrived, the guide hoped they would

have reached the lower canyons, where a camp might be made. All of the boys were really tired of climbing about among so many dangerous narnow paths, and would welcome the coming of the time when they could move around without constant danger of being dashed to death over some precipice.

None of them claimed to be born mountain climbers. They preferred to take their fun in some other way.

When the route changed somewhat in its character, so that the little party could gather more together, an animated conversation broke out. The guide was fairly flooded with questions concerning the country, and what he knew about its past.

"I've been all through here many's the time," Toby declared, waving a hand to cover the surroundings generally. "And some other fellers, they've jest been fairly hauntin' these regions in years past; but 'twa'n't any use; for they never could find that old mine again."

"What's that?" demanded Step Hen, scenting an interesting item, for he was always on the lookout for such things as seemed to promise a touch of mystery.

"A mine; what kind was it, Toby; who lost it; and why haven't they been able to find it any more?" asked Giraffe, eagerly; while Bumpus crowded closer, for he had a little mercenary streak

in his make-up, and was keen to discover a chance to lay by another store of hard cash, that might insure a succession of glorious outings for the Silver Foxes.

The guide seemed nothing loth to tell what little he knew.

"Why, you see, thar was a man named Rawson—met him lots of times myself; and one time after he'd been pokin' about in this section, prospectin', he came to Greeley with his pockets just bulgin' out with the richest silver ore ever seen. All he'd say was he'd struck a lode that was mighty nigh the pure stuff. Then he went away, to try an' get up a company to work his mine, they sez, an' he never kim back. Nobody never knowed whatever became of Rawson; but heaps of folks has hunted high an' low to find his rich mine. Why, thar was that old miner, Kunnel John Kracker, I jest reckon he spent as much as four months several times up around here, pokin' into the most unlikely places you ever heard tell of. They sez as how he was so dead sot on findin' that same lost silver mine, that he near went dippy over it."

"And nobody has ever managed to locate it again, since that day so many years ago; is that what you mean, Toby?" asked Thad.

"So she seems, Mr. Scout Master," replied the other, who always gave Thad this full appellation when addressing him.

"Bumpus, what in the wide world are you chuckling at, back there?" demanded Davy Jones.

"Don't you know Bumpus enough," laughed Allan, "to guess that already he sees the wonderful Silver Foxes discovering that lost silver mine, and just grabbing handfuls of cash right out of it, to pay the expenses of the next trip—where's it going to be another time, Bumpus; down to the gulf, cruising; or along the Mexican border; for you know scouts should never go outside the borders of their own country?"

"Well, why not?" demanded the fat boy, defiantly; "look back at the stunts we've carried through so far, and tell me if it would be so *very* strange if we just happened to drop in on this old hidden mine of the Rockies? Luck camps on the trail of the Silver Fox Patrol every time; and I'm ready to shake hands with anything that needs clearing up. You just wait, and see if I'm so far off, that's all."

"And just to think of his name being John Kracker; now, what boy could ever keep from twisting that around, and calling him a crackerjack?" chuckled Giraffe.

"That's a good one, all right," declared the guide, laughing heartily; "and I'm some surprised, I am, that nobody ever thought to put that same on the kunnel afore this. I wish you could aseen him, boys. Why, he's as fat as—er——"

"You needn't look at me that way, Toby," burst out Bumpus, instantly, for he was more or less touchy with respect to his size. "I'm taperin' down right along these days. Why, I don't reckon I weigh within three pounds as much as I did when we said good-bye to Cranford."

"And you lost all of that the time you walked and walked for days, huntin' for your bear!" put in Davy Jones.

"Well, I got him, all right, didn't I, tell me that?" asked Bumpus, proudly, as he patted the double-barreled ten gauge Marlin shotgun, which he insisted on carrying across his shoulder, while most of the others were satisfied to secure their guns to the pack saddles.

"You sure did," replied Davy, willing to give honor where honor was due.

"I was jest agoin' to say, the kunnel, he's as fat as all get-out," Toby went on, a twinkle in his eye telling how much he really enjoyed these little skirmishes between some of his charges. "But all the same, he's the most energetic critter you ever seen. And temper, say, he's gettin' as red in the face as a turkey buzzard, struttin' around with a chip on its wing, ready for a fight. I 'spect some day the kunnel, he'll jest blow up, and disappear in a cloud of steam. And p'raps after all you might git a chanct to set eyes on him yet; because I heard down at Greeley, last time I was thar, that he'd

passed through with a couple of fellers, and packs; so it looked like he meant to give that pesky lost mine another whirl, makin' p'raps the fourth time he's been up thisaways."

"Glad to hear it," spoke up Bumpus. "Makes it more interesting to know that he's still got some faith in the story of the lost Rawson mine. But I'm real sorry for Colonel Kracker, because he's a back number since the Foxes have come to town. If he knows what's good for him he'll go away back and sit down."

"It's refreshing just to hear you say that, Bumpus," declared Allan.

"He's just talking for the fun of hearin' himself, that's what?" grumbled Step Hen. "What sort of chance would we have, a lot of greenhorns who never yet saw a silver mine; against an old-timer like him? For one I'm not going to take any sort of stock in the yarn. Like as not it's just one of the thousands of lies that are circulated all through the mining regions. Why, I've heard that there are just any amount of wonderful lost mines that never existed, my dad says, except in the mind of some crank. And my dad ought to know, because he owns stock in heaps of mines that was salted dreadful, just to sell to innocent people in the East."

"About this Rawson who was said to have found the silver lode that was nearly pure," Thad re-

marked, wishing to pick up more information;" what sort of a man was he, Toby—you said you used to know him once, I believe?"

"A pretty fair an' square sort of a prospector; and they sez as how he was that tickled over his rich find, sayin' that now his fambly could enjy some of the comforts o' life. Seems like his fust thought was 'bout them. But I never knowed whar he lived, except that it was somewhar down in Utah among the Mormons; though to be sure he wasn't belongin' to the plural wife colony, not much. Seemed to think all the world 'bout the one wife, and the children he'd got."

"Then it's too bad poor Rawson never lived to profit by his discovery," went on the scoutmaster. "If he'd only been able to hand the key to his find over to his family, they might long ago have come in for a fair share of the profits of the lode. Well, Bumpus, if, as you seem to believe, in that stubborn way of yours, that the Foxes are just *bound* to tumble into this lost mine, we'll remember, boys, to hunt up the family of Rawson, and let them share in our luck. And now, as the afternoon is getting along, we'd better be thinking of hurrying, if we hope to camp in the valley this coming night."

They made a little spurt, though it was always next to impossible to hurry those two independent pack animals, as contrary by nature as anything could be. Step Hen indeed declared they would

do well to turn the animals around, and *pretend* to want to go in the other direction; when Mike and Molly would keep on backing until they had reached the valley below in good style.

The sun was of course out of sight behind the mountainous wall standing like a great barrier in the west, when the little company of scouts finally reached the base of the eastern ridge.

"Thar's a hunky camp site jest over beyond that bunch of trees, boys;" the guide announced; "plenty of good drinkin' water for man, an' beast too. So let's head that way. Reckon you-all must be some tired with that long trip in acrost the range."

Five minutes later, and they drew up at the spot, which Thad immediately saw was just the place for pilgrims to pass a night.

"Hello! there's been a fire here!" exclaimed Giraffe, always on the lookout for anything that pertained to a blaze; for he was the greatest fire worshipper ever known.

The guide flung himself down beside the ashes, and felt of them; while the scouts waited to hear what his report would be.

"Somebody camped here jest last night," declared the forest ranger, quickly; "and like as not 'twar that ole Kunnel Kracker an' his party, bound to comb these mountains onct more, lookin' for the lost silver mine!"

CHAPTER III.

THE LETTERS OF FIRE ON THE CLIFF.

"Now, how'd he know that, Allan? D'ye reckon he tells the same way you would?" asked Step Hen, immediately interested.

Some of the others had seen the Maine boy do various "stunts" along the line of woodcraft, on previous occasions; and among others he had been able to tell just about how many hours previous a fire had been abandoned, by the "feel" of the ashes, as Giraffe always declared.

"Pretty much the same, I suppose, Step Hen," replied the other, pleasantly, for Allan, being one of the officers of the patrol, was always glad to find any of the scouts interested in picking up information; and never refused to assist to the best of his ability.

Toby was examining the ground around the ashes with those snapping eyes of his, small in point of size, but capable of taking in every point going.

"How d'ye suppose he did do it?" persisted Step Hen, who was very determined, once he had set his mind on anything—stubbornness some of his camp-mates called it.

"Oh! there are ways easier to grasp in your mind than explain," Allan remarked. "You just *seem* to know a thing. Some hidden instinct tells you, I might say. You feel a deadness in the ashes that's different from fresh ones. And then the looks tell you whether the dew has fallen on them or not. In this case Toby, I reckon, has found out that they seem mighty fresh; and so no night has passed since the last spark of fire died out. There are other ways of telling about how many nights ago it may have been made, if an old one. But you ought to make a practice of studying these things connected with fires, Giraffe, instead of being always wanting to make fresh blazes. You'd find the matter mighty interesting, and worth while, I give you my word."

"Say, that gives me an idea!" exploded the tall scout; "and mebbe I will. Just as you say, Allan, everybody's getting sore on me for wanting to always build fires and fires, *and* fires. I've been able to start 'em every which way, from flint and steel, to twirling a stick with a bow, after the style of them South Sea Islanders; and like old Alexander I'm cryin' for new worlds to conquer. Well, here they are, just like you say; and connected with fires too; right in my line, so to speak. Thank you for giving me the tip, Allan; I'm sure goin' to think it over."

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Step Hen, fervently.

"Now, what d'ye say that for?" demanded Giraffe, taking umbrage at once.

"If ever you devote your colossal mind to the job of seeing how many ways fires can be *put out*, instead of started, the rest of us'll have a chance to get some decent sleep nights; because we won't be always afraid of the woods burnin' up with your crazy experiments," and Step Hen moved a little further away from his chum as he said this, not knowing how Giraffe might take it.

But the tall scout, after meditating over the matter for part of a minute only remarked indifferently:

"Oh! that's all right, Step Hen; you've got your faults too, and big ones in the bargain. Ask Bumpus here if my faculty for makin' fires didn't save us from a whole peck of trouble that time up in Maine when we found ourselves lost, a cold night comin' on, two partridges shot, and not a single match in the crowd to start a fire to cook the game and keep us from freezing stiff. He knows."

"That's right," declared the fat scout, instantly, and with a fond look toward Giraffe, as memories of the occasion referred to came trooping into his mind, so that he could almost smell the odor of those cooking birds, thrust near the delightful fire on the points of long splinters of wood.

Meanwhile the guide had come back to where the little party began to make preparations for the

night, the packs having been taken from the backs of Mike and Molly, and everybody finding something to do in the bustle.

"Get anything?" asked Thad, as Toby Smathers came up, a grin decorating his sunburnt but honest face.

"Oh! it was the kunnel, all right," replied the guide. "I knows the mark o' his hoof among a thousand. An' he's got them two pizen sharks along o' him, Waffles and Dickey Bird. They been kicked out of nigh every camp in the silver region, but they just about suit the ijee of the kunnel, when he wants any dirty work done."

"And that's what you call finding the long lost silver mine, do you?" asked the scoutmaster, smiling.

"Well, accordin' to the ijee of most decent miners, that same Rawson had the first claim on that ere mine; and any feller that rediscovers it ought to turn a third of the proceeds over to the fambly of the man as got thar first. But you don't ketch Kunnel Kracker doin' any such foolish business as that. He'd gobble the whole business, and snap his finger at the widow and orphans. But they's one thing I don't just exactly understand about the marks hereabouts. Seems to be a boy along with the gang. Now, whatever could such an old seasoned prospector and miner as Kracker want with a half grown boy up in this part of the country,

when he's huntin' for a mine that seems to have dropped out of sight, like it fell through to China? That's what gets *me*."

"Perhaps it might be an Indian boy; we had a glimpse of such a half grown brave skulking along, one day. He seemed to want to count noses in our crowd the worst kind, and we wondered if he meant to steal anything; but after a while he just cut stick and cleared out, looking a lot disappointed over something. Giraffe here tried to get close enough to him to speak, but he was that shy he kept moving off all the time. We thought he might have expected to see somebody he knew among us, a boy perhaps, and when he found that we were a pack of strangers he didn't want anything more to do with us."

"This wa'n't any red-skinned boy, but a white," Toby declared, positively. "An Injun would a toed-in, and wore moccasins; but he had on shoes, and turned his toes out, all right, civilized way. But then, just as you say, p'raps it don't matter a row of beans to us who he was. We may run acrost 'em sooner or later; and again mebbe we won't."

When the two tents were in position it began to look "jolly much like a camp," as Step Hen declared.

The mules were allowed to graze on the little tufts of grass that grew in spots around, where

there was enough earth to allow of such a thing. Close by was an occasional stunted tree, from which the boys easily secured all the firewood that was apt to be needed.

And how genial that blaze did look in the coming night, as it shone upon the tents, the smiling faces of the scouts, and the general surroundings, so wild and lonely.

"Looks like we owned the whole world," remarked Bumpus, "when you just squint around, and see the old Rockies towerin' up to the right and to the left, behind and before. Say, this is what we've been lookin' forward to a long time, ain't it, fellers?"

Bumpus seemed to be happier over the situation than any of the others. Really, it was queer how deep an interest the stout youth had always taken in this trip to the Wild Northwest. He it was who first suggested the same, and on every occasion he had fostered the idea. Up in Maine, when they first heard about that rich reward offered for the recovery of the missing valuables that had been stolen from a bank, Bumpus had been the one to declare that they ought to recover them, so as to have plenty of funds in the treasury, to pay the expenses of a grand trip to the backbone of the continent, those glorious mountains which he saw so often in his day dreams, and yearned so much to visit.

Of course, by this time every one of his chums had become filled with enthusiasm also, and there was no faint answer to this question on the part of Bumpus.

Pretty soon supper was started, and that was a time when the scouts began to be more or less restless. Tired as they might be, when the delicious odors permeated the outermost limits of the camp, no one seemed able to sit still. The fact of the matter was that they were ravenously hungry, and it was tantalizing to get the "smell" of the cooking, with the knowledge that it would be at least half an hour ere they could begin to satisfy their appetites. Any one who knows the make-up of average boys, understands that.

"I wouldn't like to be caught in parts of this valley, in a cloud-burst," Davy Jones remarked; "I've been alookin' around some, and there's signs that tell of floods long ago. Guess a feller'd have hike some, to get away if a wall of water came whirlin' down here."

"But the hunting ought to be fine, don't you think, Toby?" asked Step Hen, who had begun to have aspirations to equal the record of several of his comrades; and more than once declared that nothing less than a big-horn Rocky Mountain sheep would satisfy his ambition. "I c'n just think I see the jumpers playin' leap-frog up along some of the cliffs that stand out against the sky yonder."

"We'll find sheep, sooner or later, all right," asserted the guide, who was engaged in cutting wood for the fire; and more than that he would not say, being a man of words rather than big promises.

"Look at Giraffe, would you?" remarked Step Hen. "He just can't quit playin' with fire all the time."

"What's he doing now?" asked Thad, with a laugh, and not bothering to look up; for it happened that just then he was making some notes in his log book, fearing lest they slip his mind, if he waited until after supper.

"Oh! he's got a firebrand, and standing out there in the dark he's doing all sort of queer stunts with it—whirling it around several times; then movin' it up and down, quick like; after which he crosses it horizontally a few times. Why, just to look at him you'd think he was sending a message like we do with the wigwag flags in the day time."

"Well, that's just what Giraffe is pretending to do, right now," said Thad, after he had taken one quick look. "Only instead of using flags, he's taking a light to make the letters with. Giraffe is a pretty good hand at heliograph work and all kinds of wigwagging, you know. I've talked with him by means of a piece of looking glass, on a sunshiny day, more than a mile away; and we managed to understand each other first-rate. Leave Giraffe alone, Step Hen. He's a nervous scout,

you understand, and has to work off his steam some way. There couldn't be any better than brushing up his Morse code, I think."

"Huh! p'raps you're right," grunted the other; "but it does beat all, how Giraffe, always finds satisfaction in playing with fire."

"There's one good thing, about it these days," ventured Davy Jones.

"What might that be, suh?" asked the Southern boy, Bob White, looking up; for he was assisting to get supper ready.

"Why, we don't have to be afraid of Giraffe setting the woods on fire any more. It'd take a job bigger'n he could manage to get a fire goin' in this rocky valley," and Step Hen laughed as he said this; for indeed, the sparse and stunted trees that grew at intervals along the sides of the mountains did not seem to offer much encouragement to a would-be incendiary.

"How much longer do we have to wait for grub?" asked Bumpus, sighing dismally.

"What's that to you?" demanded Giraffe, from outside the limits of the camp proper; he having heard the plaint. "If you went without a bite for a week, sure, you could live on your fat, Bumpus; but think of *me*. Why, in two days' time my backbone'd be rubbing up against my front ribs; and in another they would have a riot. I've got a space to fill all the time. Please hurry up, fellers. Some-

body blow the fire, and make it cook faster, won't you?"

"You might be doing the same, Giraffe, 'stead of wastin' all your surplus energy aswipin' the empty air out there," called out Step Hen disdainfully, and yet with a slight touch of envy in his voice; for, truth to tell, he aimed to equal the proficiency of the lanky scout in the signal line.

So they went on exchanging remarks, as the minutes dragged slowly past, each seeming more like an hour to the half-starved boys. In vain did those who were doing the cooking tell them to keep their eyes anywhere but on the fire, because "a watched pot never boils."

But by slow degrees the supper was nearing readiness. Bumpus was even making his mouth give signs of his eagerness to begin; and some of the others had even taken up their tin platters hoping to be helped first, when Giraffe suddenly came jumping into camp, wildly excited.

Thad looked up from his writing, half expecting to see him followed by a savage mountain wolf, or possibly a full-grown grizzly bear; but to his astonishment the boy who carried the burning fagot of wood cried out as well as he could in his great excitement:

"Thad—Allan—look! look! somebody's making wigwag letters with a blaze like mine, away up yonder on the face of that high cliff; and I could

read it, sure I could! And Thad, oh! what do you think, it keeps on sayin' the same thing over and over all the time, aspellin' out the one word: 'help! help! help!'"

The scoutmaster jumped to his feet instantly, ramming the note book deep down in his pocket as he grasped Giraffe eagerly by the arm, exclaiming:

"Come and show me what you mean! I hope you haven't mistaken a star for a torch!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE TORCH TALK.

Every one of the scouts was on his feet by this time, even fat Bumpus managing to struggle erect with the rest. And strange to say, the supper that was just about to be dished out was for the time being utterly swallowed up in this new and thrilling excitement.

They trooped after Thad and Giraffe, the latter still hanging on to his blazing torch. Toby was left alone by the fire; but after making sure that the supper was in no danger of burning up, the cool, level-headed guide followed his charges over to the spot where Giraffe had happened to be stand-

ing, when he noticed the odd signals from up on the face of the cliff.

"Where is it right now, Giraffe?" demanded Davy Jones.

"Nothin' doin'!" added Step Hen, in disgust. "Now what d'ye think of that? The feller had his own eyes blinded by whirling his old blaze around so much, that he just *thought* he glimpsed another light up there. Say, p'raps Thad hit the thing on the head when he mentioned a star. Like as not now, Giraffe, he just saw one peepin' over the top of the mountains at him, and thought it winked. Well, this takes the cake; and all that fine supper gettin' cold while we're gaping out here. It's a burnin' shame, that's what it is. Me for the fire again."

"Wait!" said Thad, in that tone of authority that always found ready respect from the scouts under him; it was the scoutmaster, and not their chum, who spoke, whenever Thad used that very stern voice.

"Give you my word for it, Thad, I saw it again and again," Giraffe went on, as if he felt that his veracity as a scout was hanging in the balance.

"Point out the exact place," said Thad, promptly.

"I can do it all right, and don't you forget it, Step Hen," declared the tall scout, eagerly; and accordingly, raising his torch, he held it stationary at an angle of nearly forty-five degrees.

"Right there she was, Thad; and if you look close now, p'raps you c'n see a sorter glow like," he went on, again showing excitement.

"I believe I do," replied Thad. "Here, give me that torch of yours, Giraffe."

"What are you goin' to do, Thad?" asked the other, even while he complied with the request, which was in the shape of a command.

"Try and see if I can get a raise again."

As Thad said this he started to wave the torch in several ways. Now he lifted it and lowered it rapidly; then it went out at an angle; and followed with several circles, or possibly a diagonal dash.

And Giraffe saw that he was spelling out the word:

"Hello!"

Eagerly they waited to see the result.

As the last letter was formed, and the wind-up sign made to indicate the message had been completed, to the astonishment of most of the boys there was a sudden response. Away up on the face of what seemed to be a high cliff a light appeared, and began to cut strange figures and lines in the air, as an arm swung it to and fro. And Thad, as he started to read the letters, realized that whoever it might be trying to get in communication with those in the valley, he certainly knew his Morse code all right; indeed a regular telegrapher and wigwag artist belonging to the Signal Corps of

the United States Army could hardly have shown more proficiency in the business.

Regularly then, without a hitch, the fiery finger outlined against the dark background spelled out the significant word:

"Help!"

Thad read each letter aloud, for the benefit of those among the scouts who, not being so well along in the work, might have some difficulty in following those wizard flashes to and fro, up and down, and around.

"Just like I said, ain't it, Thad?" breathed Giraffe, as if he felt that his reputation, assailed by Step Hen, had been fully vindicated; but the scoutmaster did not bother answering his question, since he had his mind wholly bent upon solving the mystery of the mountains.

Again he started making erratic movements with the torch he gripped in his right hand; and the staring Giraffe read what the patrol leader was saying to the unknown party perched aloft.

"What is the matter?"

Then the light appeared again, and it seemed as though the other might purposely be keeping it concealed between messages; and back came the startling answer, which Thad spelled aloud as it was sent:

"In trouble—come up—help me!"

"Great governor! what d'ye suppose ails him?"

exclaimed Giraffe, seldom being able to keep a still tongue in his head, especially when excited very much; and just then he was quivering all over with nervous eagerness to solve the mystery.

"Somebody bring me another stick from the fire," said Thad; "this one is getting burnt out. Giraffe, you go, because you'll know what kind I want better than any of the others."

Giraffe might have felt like rebelling, because he hated the worst kind to lose a single word of that mighty interesting exchange of signals; but Thad, as usual, had been wise enough to coat the order with a little subtle flattery that served as oil to lubricate matters. Since none of the other scouts could be trusted to select the right kind of torch necessary for signaling purposes, why, of course Giraffe must sacrifice all other personal desires, for the common good. And so he walked toward the fire, though most of the time that long neck of his kept "rubbering" backward, so as to give him something of a chance to see what came next on the programme.

"Who are you?" Thad waved upward, each letter being clear and distinct; for the scout leader knew the folly of running them into one another, and confusing the receiving end of the battery.

"Aleck Rawson!"

When Thad had spelled this out, various exclamations arose from the boys.

"Rawson—why, that was the name of the man who found the silver mine up in this country, wasn't it, Toby?" cried Davy Jones, voicing the thought that had flashed into the mind of every boy just then.

"It sure was," replied the guide.

"Can this be him, then; has he been a prisoner all these years?" gasped Smithy; at which there was a scornful laugh from the others.

"His name wa'n't Aleck; near as I kin remember 'twas Jerry," said Toby.

"P'raps, suh, he had a son?" suggested Bob White.

"Just what I was going to remark," added Allan, eagerly.

The intelligence that had come to them in that last reply had created a sensation among the scouts. Indeed, even Thad was so astonished that for the moment he could not find words in which to continue the interesting conversation by fire.

Then his torch expired.

"Hurry Giraffe, and fetch me that other light!" he called; but there was hardly any need of saying this, because the party in question was already advancing by kangaroo-like leaps, covering ground in a manner simply miraculous.

"What was that last he said?" he demanded, and Step Hen made haste to answer, partly because he wanted to stagger the tall scout; and then per-

haps he realized that Giraffe would really give them no peace until he was told:

"Said his name was Aleck Rawson—remember what Toby told us about the man who found the mine long years ago! Well, this might happen to be his boy, we think."

"Keep still! Thad's going to talk some more!" grumbled Bumpus.

Again did the fire signaling go on; and the new torch selected by the expert Giraffe proved even better that the one that had burned out. Letter by letter did Thad send a long message, and Allan spelled it out as it progressed; so that by the time it was completed every one knew just what had been flashed upward toward the unseen receiving party above.

"Can we get up to where you are?"

Now the fiery finger in the darkness began to write an answer; every letter was plainly carried out, so that not in a signal instance did Thad "trip up" as he read it aloud.

"Yes, but come quick—bring rope—might fall any minute!"

"I bet you he's hanging on to a little narrow shelf of rock!" declared Bumpus.

"But if he is, how in the dickens could he get the fire to signal with; that's what bothers me?" muttered Giraffe.

"Where are you?" signaled the scoutmaster,

promptly, thinking to get all the information possible while the chance remained.

"On a ledge part way down the cliff," answered the one who had said his was Aleck Rawson.

"How did you get there?" went on Thad.

"Lowered here, and left to die like a dog," came the stunning answer.

"Did you ever hear the equal of that?" cried out Bumpus. "Now what sort of people could ever be guilty of such a horrible thing as that, I'd like to know?"

"Oh!" remarked the guide, "they's a heap of bad men around these parts, I tell ye; but I got a notion I kin see through a board that's got a knot-hole in it. Ask him who put him there, Mr. Scout Master, please?"

Thad would have done this, even though Toby had not spoken; indeed, he was even then about to start putting the question.

"Who put you there?"

"Colonel Knocker did—will you come and get me?"

"The old villain!" gasped Bumpus. "He ought to be tarred and feathered for such a wicked piece of work. What d'ye suppose he did it for? I wonder now, if this same Aleck Rawson could know anything about the secret of that hidden mine; and Cracker-jack John just wants to torture him till he tells?"

"That sounds like it, Bumpus; you're good at guessing things, after all," remarked Step Hen.

"Keep still, back there; Thad's sending another message!" warned Giraffe.

And in his steady way, the scoutmaster went on to flash back the reassuring words:

"Yes, we will come to you. Hold on! It may take us some time. Start right away!"

"Thank you!" came from above, and then the light that had moved backward and forward, up and down, and around in eccentric circles, vanished, as though with that last word the torch, if that was what it was, had been exhausted.

But at least it had served long enough to bear a startling message to the boys of the Silver Fox Patrol, camping there in the valley of the great Rockies.

"Now what?" exclaimed the impatient Giraffe.

Somehow, not one of them gave the waiting supper a single thought just then; for this new and exciting diversion had made them utterly forget such a thing as being hungry.

"I want several of you to go along with me," said Thad; "Toby for one, because of his strong arms, in case we have to do any lifting; also Giraffe; and Allan, perhap you'd like to be in the party also?"

"I certainly would," declared the Maine boy instantly;" if you think I can be spared from the camp."

"Oh!" said Thad, "they'll get on all right here, because every fellow will be put on his honor not to stray away from the fire while we're gone. Bumpus, please let me have that rope you carry with you. It's proved valuable several times already, and may come in all right again."

Bumpus had a very queer idea, in that he persisted in carrying a thin, braided rope wrapped around his body. It was of the sash cord species, slender, but extra strong. Bumpus had seen the great need of a rope once or twice, and made up his mind that he would never be without one, when abroad in the woods or wilderness. And it had proven useful to him too; in fact, but for its possession Bumpus might not have been there, so blithe and happy, at that very moment. Having unfortunately become mired in a slimy mudhole when lost in the big timber, he was slowly sinking on account of his desperate efforts to get out, when he happened to notice the convenient limb of a tree just a couple of feet over his head; and remembering his rope, he had thrown it, doubled, over the same; and by making a tremendous spurt, managed to drag his feet out of the sucking mud, climbing to safety.

And of course after that nothing could ever induce the fat scout to think of abandoning that precious rope.

So he started to unwind it now; and as if this

might be a signal for some of the boys to assist, they seized hold of Bumpus, pulling at the rope, until they had him whirling around in a dizzy fashion, protesting all the while, but without any avail. Finally the rope was wholly unwound, and Bumpus found himself sitting there on the ground, with the stars waving in all sorts of queer circles over his head, for he felt as "rocky" as though he had been indulging in strong drink.

"But be *aw*ful careful of that rope, won't you, Thad?" he managed to call out, as the scoutmaster started to coil it up for carrying.

"I certainly will, Bumpus," replied the other; "and thank you for the loan of it. Come on, those who are going with me; take your guns along, even if we don't find any use for them. And say, you fellows in camp, save our share of supper for us, remember!"

CHAPTER V.

TAKING FATHER'S PLACE.

"MUST be nearly up at the top now, Thad."

It was Giraffe who said this. The little party of four, Thad; Toby, the guide; Giraffe, and Allan, had been climbing upwards steadily for more than

an hour now; and even the long-legged scout was beginning to pant more or less from the exertion.

Having been through the valley more than once before, Toby Smathers had been able to take them along the trail that led up the other side. Often they would have been at a loss just how to proceed only for his superior knowledge. And then the moon had risen too, which meant considerable in the way of light; for topping the other range, it shed its brilliant illumination on the side of the elevation the scouts were now mounting so bravely.

"How about it, Toby?" asked the patrol leader, wishing to satisfy his own curiosity, as well as please Giraffe.

"Right thar, now, and arter this we ain't goin' to have much climbin'. But you-all want to be keerful 'bout goin' too clost to the edge. That drop is all of three hundred feet, I reckons," the guide made answer.

"And think of those sharks aleavin' that boy part way down the face of that awful precipice!" said Giraffe, gritting his teeth in a way he had of doing when he wished to let everybody know just how mad he was.

"It's taken a whole hour for us to climb up here," remarked Thad;" and we can hardly count on getting back to the camp in less than another, even if things go right with us."

"Well, wasn't I wise, then, in sayin' we had ought to snatch up some grub, to bite at on the way?" declared Giraffe, triumphantly. "I reckon, now, I'd never a been able to a clumb up this far, if I hadn't kept nibblin' away at the stuff they handed us when we was startin' out. And there's more awaitin' for us after we get back, which I take it is a lucky thing; because my appetite keeps on growin' all the while, what with this tough climb."

On the way of course the three scouts had indulged in all sorts of speculations concerning the cause of Colonel Kracker treating the son of Jerry Rawson in such a scurvy way.

And after the subject had been thoroughly discussed, it seemed to be the consensus of opinion that the boy must possess some map, or at least some knowledge concerning the location of the hidden mine, which the money-mad prospector, whose one idea in life nowadays seemed to be the discovery of this rich silver lode, was trying to force him to give up.

"Anyhow," Giraffe had declared, with conviction in his voice, "I give you my word now, that Aleck's been a Boy Scout, some time or other; because he wouldn't a known how to wigwag that clever way if he hadn't."

Thad had come to the same conclusion some time before; and somehow the idea gave him more or less satisfaction. How often was it being made

patent that the very fact of a boy taking up with the scouts might prove one of the most valuable assets he could possess. If the boy on the ledge—for they insisted on believing that this Aleck Rawson *must* be a fellow of perhaps their own age—had not known how to communicate by means of the telegraphic code, he might have had considerably greater difficulty in letting them know of his predicament, and asking for immediate assistance.

Of course, there were plenty of knotty things that none of them pretended to be able to explain; but then Thad felt sure all would be made clear, once they had drawn the other up from his dangerous position on that ledge, down along the face of the precipice, that had been a cliff when they were below it.

Now and then they would come to a pause, it being necessary that the guide take an observation, in order to locate their position. He had several ways for doing this, and Thad, as well as Allan, understood enough about them to know that Toby was "making good."

It was all so much Greek however to Giraffe, who fretted considerably because there was any delay, the need of which he could not understand.

But in the end the guide announced that he believed they must now be about over the identical spot from which the fire signals had come. A dark void down below told where the great valley

lay. The moon, about in the full now, was hanging there just above the opposite range, and lighting up their wild surroundings.

"Seems to me we ought to see him, if he's still there?" grumbled Giraffe, just as though he meant to hint that if the imperiled boy had lost his hold, and fallen, it would be partly because they had been so slow in getting there.

"Perhaps we may," replied Thad, as Toby crawled to the edge to peer over; but it wouldn't surprise me if we found that the face of the precipice backed in, and that would keep us from sighting the ledge, or any one on it."

"Looky! there's Toby beckonin' to us. Come on, fellers!" and the eager Giraffe started to move toward the edge of the descent.

Knowing that Giraffe was inclined to be reckless in his haste, Thad kept close beside him, and whispered words of warning.

"Slow now, Giraffe," he said; "be careful, because we wouldn't like to have you take a plunge down there. You'd never know what hurt you, if you did."

Thus warned the other did slow up a little; but quickly they all reached a position where they could stretch their necks, and look over.

The moonlight fell on the face of the precipice. They could even see away down near the base, where the sharp rocks that had fallen during count-

less years in the past were piled up in ugly masses. Just as Thad had remarked, if ony one did have the hard luck to fall over, he would never know what hurt him.

"It does slant in below, Thad!" said Giraffe, the first thing.

"Yes, and we've got to call out to learn whether he's there or not," returned the scoutmaster; then raising his voice a little he said:

"Hello! Aleck, are you here?"

Immediately they heard an exclamation of delight, and then came a reply:

"Yes, yes, and right underneath you too, I think. Have you got a rope along with you?"

"Just what we have; and I hope it's going to be long enough," replied Thad.

"Then quick, tie a stone to the end, and lower away. When you have got it down opposite to me, give a swing in and out. I can take hold easy enough, if you do that," came from below, in the eager tones of one in whose heart new hope had taken lodgment.

Thad lost no time in fastening on a piece of stone, after which he started to lower away, all the while listening, hoping to hear a cry that the stone had gone down far enough. As he was getting perilously near the end of the rope, his heart had begun to misgive him, when suddenly came a hail:

"Hold on! that is far enough! Now, keep a tight grip up there!"

"Get hold with me, the rest of you," said Thad, allowing the guide to be first; for he wished to take as much advantage of Toby's great strength as possible, when it came time for the hard pulling.

Thad started to swing the rope inward and outward, as he had been directed. A minute later, and the one below called again:

"There, I've got it, all right; and I find you were smart enough to make a loop for my foot. Tell me when you're ready, and I'll let loose down here. It'll be a heavy load; and I hope you won't let the rope slip through."

Looking down at the dim vacancy far below Thad felt that the other had some reason for feeling a trifle worried over the possibility of an accident; so he hastened to reassure Aleck.

"Four of us have hold here, and one is a strong man; so don't believe anything is going to happen to you, Aleck. Tell us when you're going; it's all right up here with us."

"Then I'm off!"

With the words they felt a sudden heavy strain, and knew that the speaker had allowed himself to swing clear of the ledge, as he suggested he would do.

"Careful now, everybody!" warned cautious Thad; "there's no hurry about it; and we don't

want to knock him to hard against the face of the wall. Easy, Giraffe, Rome wasn't built in a day; and slow makes sure, sometimes. This is one of them."

While Thad was speaking in this manner, he lay close to the edge of the abyss, so he could guide the rope, and avoid letting it be cut by any sharp stone; and at the same time watch out below.

Foot by foot did the guide, assisted by the two scouts, draw the imperiled one upward. Presently Thad could see him plainly below, swinging a little, turning around also, but always coming closer and closer.

He was reminded somewhat of Smithy's little adventure on the preceding day; only in his case there had been really very little danger, although at the time the poor fellow had not known but that a thousand feet of space lay below him, rather than a beggarly five, as was later on discovered.

Now Thad could stretch out a hand, and touch the other.

"Slower still; he's right here, boys!" he cautioned.

Then he got a grip himself, and held on. Giraffe came to his assistance; while Allan and the guide continued to grip the rope. One supreme effort, in which the one they were saving did his part; and then Aleck Rawson climbed alongside his young

rescuers, panting hard with the exertion he had been through.

Giraffe felt like giving a shout; but somehow he knew Thad would frown on any such demonstration. When scouts were in a region where danger of any kind might be expected to lurk, "discretion must take the part of valor, and noise be utterly prohibited." He could distinctly remember the patrol leader saying just those very words, and not so long ago, either. So the explosive Giraffe had to bottle up his enthusiasm for another occasion, when the cork might safely be removed.

The scouts had already discovered that in one thing they guessed truly; for Aleck Rawson did prove to be a boy, about the size of Thad, and possibly in the neighborhood of sixteen years of age.

He was beginning to get back his breath now, and even moved a little further away from the edge of the precipice, as though it possessed only terrors for him. Nor could Thad blame him in the least; for it must have been frightful torture to be left all alone on a narrow shelf of rock, where he could not have any too good a foothold at the best, and might slip off if, overpowered by exhaustion, he dared allow himself to lose consciousness in sleep.

Presently, when the other had recovered his

wind, he might offer to tell them what it all meant; and just why that vindictive old prospector and miner, Colonel Kracker, had dared place a boy in such a position of peril; for it seemd a monstrous proceeding in the mind of the scoutmaster.

Now the boy was moving. The first thing Thad knew, a hand clutched his in a warm, fierce clasp, and he heard Aleck saying:

"Oh! how can I ever thank you for getting me out of that scrape?"

"I wouldn't try it, then," replied Thad, laughing softly. "Why, we're only too glad to have the chance. It's been an experience to remember, too; the talk with the torches, the climb up the face of the mountain, and then hauling you up safe and sound. We're Boy Scouts, out looking for adventure, and doing a little hunting; and this has all been just great, for us."

"But think what it's been for me?" said the other, with a quiver in his voice, although he tried very hard to disguise it. "My poor mother and little sisters came nearer to losing their man of the house, than I'd like them to know; because, you see, I've just had to try and take my father's place ever since he died."

"Your father, then, was Jerry Rawson, I take it?" said Thad.

"Yes, that was his name," answered the other, who had gone over and shaken hands with the

guide, with Giraffe, and finally with Allan, in each instance giving a convulsive squeeze to their hands in a way that told more eloquently than words could have ever done what intense gratitude filled his boyish heart.

"The original discoverer of the wonderful silver mine that has never been located since that time, so long ago?" Thad went on.

"Then you *do* know about that?" Aleck remarked, quickly; "I was wondering, seeing that you must be strangers around these regions, whether you had heard."

"Our guide, Tony Smathers here, told us; he used to know your father; and he said there was a family located somewhere down in Utah," the scoutmaster continued.

"My mother, and three small sisters; the youngest was a baby when he died," Aleck went on to say, as though he realized that explanations from him must now be in order, since these boys had done so much for him; and besides, even though they were next door to strangers to him, some sort of free masonry within seemed to tell Aleck that they were going to prove the best friends he had ever known.

"Do you feel able to walk with us down into the valley to our camp?" Thad asked.

"I should say I did, and be only too glad into

the bargain!" exclaimed the other, his voice filled with delight. "And while we're going I want to tell you just how it came that I was on that horrible little shelf of rock, placed there by Colonel Kracker, who said I would never leave it alive unless I gave up to him the secret of my father's hidden silver mine. And he promised to come up there above me every day, to ask me if I was ready to throw up the sponge. But I'd have died there before I played the coward, and told him what he wanted; for how could I ever look my mother and sisters in the face again, if I saved my useless life by selling out their mine to that cruel and hateful man?"

CHAPTER VI.

BACKED BY THE SILVER FOX PATROL.

"HURRAH for you, Aleck!" exclaimed Giraffe, unable to repress his feelings any longer.

Thad himself felt just as full of enthusiasm over the brave manner in which this son of Jerry Rawson had defied the man whose one desire in life now seemed to be the discovery and confiscation of the rich mine that had eluded his eager fingers for so many years; but he knew better how to repress his delight.

They were starting along the top of the precipice now. Toby leading the way, and every now and then turning his head, to warn them of a particularly risky place. Thad had made sure to coil up that precious rope belonging to generous Bumpus, and which had so frequently proven to be worth its weight in gold. Never again would Giraffe laugh at the queer conceit of the fat scout in connection with the carrying of that window-sash cord.

As the going was so difficult, and as a rule they were strung out in single file, Thad thought that it would be just as well to defer all explanations until they had arrived safely in camp. Besides, that course would save Aleck from going over things twice; since those who were not present would naturally be just as anxious to hear the particulars as they were.

So they spent all the time in making sure that they did not lose their footing, and take ugly tumbles; for the way was very steep, and the moonlight, after all, rather treacherous to depend upon wholly.

Thad figured, from the clock in the heavens which he knew how to read so well, (figuring on the position of the moon, and the multitude of stars, from Sirius, and the blazing Belt of Orion, the Hunter, in the northeast; to bright Venus in the west, now just about to vanish behind the

mountain ridge,) that they had been gone all of two hours, when once more they approached the burning fire.

They could see some of the scouts around the blaze, and as they drew near, the voice of Davy Jones called out sternly:

"Halt! who goes there?"

"Friends!" replied Thad, carrying out the humor of the thing.

"Advance friends, and give the countersign!" the sentry demanded.

"Silver Fox Patrol!" replied the scoutmaster, continuing to stride forward, and closely followed by all the others of the returning party.

"Did you get him, Thad?" asked Davy, instantly allowing his boyish curiosity to over-ride all soldierly qualities.

"That's what we did; and he's here with us, as hungry as they make them," replied the patrol leader.

"Oh! I only hope you kept lots of grub; I'm that hungry I c'n hardly walk," declared Giraffe.

"After snatching all you did too, when you went off?" complained Step Hen.

"But think what we've done since, will you?" argued the tall scout, as he pushed into camp, and hastened to settle down in a good spot, with the air of one who naturally anticipated being waited on by his chums.

"Well, we cooked a lot more," Smithy hastened to remark; "because, you see, we just calculated that you would be fairly ravenous, after your exertions. And so this is Aleck Rawson; delighted to meet you; my name is——"

"Cut that out; we call him plain Smithy!" broke in Step Hen; "and I'm Step Hen Bingham. The fat feller is Bumpus Hawtree; this other is Bob White; while the one who gave you that challenge is Davy Jones. He'll shake hands with you by offering one of his feet, because he's standing on his head about as much as the other way."

And Aleck went around, shaking hands heartily. Plainly they could see that he was more than delighted to meet with such a hearty reception; and just when it seemed as though he needed friends the worst kind.

So the newcomers were quickly waited on, and found that a bountiful supply of supper had indeed been prepared against their coming, and by boys who knew what a mountain appetite meant, too.

By degrees those who had been left in camp were told just how the rescue had been effected; and then Aleck started in to tell something about his experiences.

"I live with my mother and sisters in a town called Logan, down in the northern part of Utah. My father died several years ago, when I was a little shaver. He had just come back home, and

told us he had struck it rich, and we would never want again, when he was taken down with a fever; and after being sick a week, he died. The last thing he did in his delirium was to press a little pocket looking glass, with a cracked front, into my hands, and close my fingers on it, like he wanted me to keep it. And we thought it was just imagination that made him do it, and that perhaps he believed he was giving me all the money he saw in his wild dreams.

"Well, as the years went along, I used often to look at that little mirror, just a couple of inches across, and think of my father. We never could find anything among his traps to tell us where the mine he had discovered was located. More'n a few times this here Colonel Kracker would visit us, and tell my mother what a big thing it would be, if only she could find some little chart or rude map among my father's things, to be sort of a clew to the lost mine; but though she searched, and I looked again and again, we just couldn't.

"And one day, would you believe it, somebody broke into our cottage while we were all out, and stole everything belonging to my father, from his six shooter and gun, to the old tattered knapsack that he used to carry, when he was prospecting for pockets of rich ore, or pay dirt anywhere along the creeks."

"The old snake!" muttered Step Hen; for of

course every one of them guessed who must have been responsible for this robbery of the widow's home.

Aleck went on.

"And one day, it was only a month ago, as I was sitting there, fiddling with that same little pocket mirror, the back came loose. I was starting to pinch the metal tight again, when I discovered that there was a piece of paper between the glass and the back!"

"The clue to the lost mine?" gasped Giraffe, nearly falling over into the fire in his extravagant delight.

"Yes, that was what it turned out to be," continued the Rawson boy, actually smiling to see how deep an interest his narrative seemed to have for these splendid new friends fortune had raised up for him so opportunely. "My father must have had a return of reason just before he passed away; and not being able to say a single word, he had pressed the glass into my hands, thinking that would be enough. But somehow it had never occurred to me that he knew what he was doing."

"And that's what brings you up here right now, I reckon; you mean to find that hidden mine, and claim it for your mother, and the girls?" asked Thad.

"That is what I aim to do," replied the other, firmly. "But I think that man must have kept a

spy watching our house, after he failed to find anything among the things that were stolen; for I've since had reason to believe that every movement of mine was known to him. And when he learned that I was going to start north he guessed that I had a clue of some sort to the mine."

"And so he captured you, perhaps right here where our camp is now; because Toby told us there were the footprints of a boy along with those of Colonel Kracker, and his two cronies, Waffles and Dickey Bird," Giraffe ventured to say.

"They did drop in on me right here; and taking me sort of by surprise, made me a prisoner easy enough," remarked Aleck, somewhat shame-facedly, as though he considered it far from being to his credit; "but there was something that happened before that ought to have warned me to be on the watch."

"What was it?" asked the impatient Giraffe, as the other paused, while trying to eat and talk at the same time.

"Well, you see, down below here, I thought I ought to employ some sort of guide, because I wasn't altogether accustomed to being all alone in the wilderness; though I've always used a gun, and hunted. And along about that time I ran across a man who seemed to be friendly, and knew the country, he said, like a book. His name was Matt Griggs, he said; and the upshot of it all was he

engaged to pilot me around up here as long as I wanted him. You see, my plan was to shake him just when I found my bearings, and felt that I could go on alone; because, of course I didn't want any outsider to be with me when I took possession of my father's mine.

"I was careful never to breathe a word of what I had in mind; just told him I wanted to knock around for a few weeks among the mountains up here. And unless I talked in my sleep, which I never knew myself to do, there wasn't any way Matt Griggs could learn from me the real reason for my wanting to come to this particular section.

"But one night I woke up, and found the guide searching through my knapsack; and then all of a sudden it struck me he was in the pay of that old scoundrel of a Colonel Kracker. He meant to rob me of my secret, and had thrown himself across my path on purpose, just about the time it was supposed I'd be wanting to take on a guide.

"Of course I covered him with my gun, and sent him away without a cartridge in his possession. He was ugly about it, too, and vowed he'd get even with me yet. Well, he did, for my treacherous guide came in with Kracker and a second man; so I reckon he must be one of those you spoke of, perhaps Waffles; for I heard the other called Dickey, once or twice."

"When they took you a prisoner, they searched

you, of course, hoping to find the valuable paper?" asked Giraffe, who could not wait for the natural unfolding of the plot, but must needs hasten matters by means of pointed questions.

"They raked me over with a fine-tooth comb," replied the other, with a little chuckle, as though proud of what he had done; "but of course I had been too smart to carry that paper where it could be found, and so they had all their trouble for their pains. Then Kracker was as mad as a wet hen. He stormed, and threatened, and tried to fool me with a whole lot of silly promises; but it wasn't any use. I just told him that even if I knew the secret of the hidden mine, I'd die before I gave it up to him, or any one like him."

"Well, you saw what he did, in the end; took me up there, and lowered me to that terrible ledge, saying he was going to leave me there to starve; and that when the buzzards came flocking around me, and I was wild for a bite to eat, perhaps I'd feel a little like telling him what he was bound to know, for he promised to come and ask me every day."

"This was when?" asked Thad.

"I think it must have been about noon when they lowered me at the end of a rope," Aleck went on to explain." One of the men knew about that ledge, and the idea seemed to tickle Kracker more than a little. They just shoved me over, and it

was keep a tight hold on that rope for me, or a drop to the cruel rocks away down at the foot of the precipice. Then, late in the afternoon I saw you come into the valley far below. I wanted to shout, at first, but was afraid you were only some of the other hard cases of silver mine hunters like Kracker. But I had found out in the meantime that in crevices of the rock some small trees had once taken root, several of them dying, so that I amused myself in breaking off pieces of wood and starting a little fire deep in a fissure I found, and which they didn't know anything about, I guess.

"Then, to my surprise I saw some one making all sorts of figures in the darkness with what seemed to be a torch. I used to belong to the Boy Scout troop of Logan, you see, and for a little while I even manipulated the telegraph key in the railroad station a few miles out of there, on the Oregon Southern Railroad; so that I soon saw he was practicing the Morse code. And then a wild desire came over me to get in touch with you. What I did, you all know; and I'm the happiest fellow in the whole Rocky Mountains to think that I've found friends up here, friends who say they'll stand back of me, and help me win out in my fight for my father's mine."

There were tears in Aleck Rawson's blue eyes as he said this last, and somehow every one of the scouts was deeply affected. It does not take much

to arouse the boyish spirit of enthusiasm as a rule; and what they had already seen and heard of young Aleck Rawson, made the members of the Silver Fox Patrol ready to enlist heart and soul in his cause.

"There are nine of us here," said Thad, quietly, but with a firmness that thrilled the newcomer in the camp; "it's true that all but one of us are boys; but then we've got guns, and can use them too, if we have to. And let me tell you, Aleck, we're the kind of friends that stick. We've heard a lot about this hidden mine that your father discovered, and believe that it ought to belong to your mother, and no one else. This old rascal of a Kracker is a regular pirate, a land shark that ought to be tied up to a stake, and tarred and feathered, for the way he persecuted you, just because you refused to give away your secret, which means everything to your folks. And Aleck, we're going to stand by you through thick and thin! We've met up with you in about the queerest way ever heard of; and after getting you off that ledge up there, don't think we want to call it quits. You're a scout, a fellow scout in trouble; and we wouldn't deserve the name we bear if we didn't promise to back you up to the limit. How about it, boys?"

"That's the talk!" declared Giraffe, with great vim.

"He can count on us, every time," said Step Hen.

And so it went the entire rounds of the little circle, every boy echoing the sentiments that had made Thad, as the patrol leader, promise the harassed lad all the assistance that lay in their power.

After that the camp quieted down, and the boys went about their ordinary pursuits. Davy was fiddling with his little camera, the fever growing stronger in his veins with each passing day. Indeed, where some of his chums talked of shooting Rocky Mountain sheep, grizzlies, timber wolves, panthers and the like, the Jones boy could be heard expressing his opinion that "shooting" the same in their native haunts with a snapshot camera, was more to his taste.

And there was Step Hen, as usual, loudly bemoaning the loss of something that he just felt sure he had had only five minutes before, but which was now gone as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed it up.

"'Taint as though it was the first time, either," he was saying, in a grumbling tone, as of one deeply injured, while he eyed his chums suspiciously; "it's always *my* stuff that's bein' so mysteriously moved about, so that I never know where to put my hand on the same. Now, I reckon more'n a few of you saw my service hat on my head just a little while ago; but tell me where it is now, will you? If one

of you snatched it off in your slick way, and is just hiding the same, let me notify you right now it's a mean joke. Thad, can *you* tell me where my hat is?"

Having the question thus put directly at him, the patrol leader felt compelled to make a reply.

"Well, Step Hen," he said, slowly and convincingly, "I can't exactly do that, but I think I might give a pretty good guess, knowing you so well. Just five minutes ago you showed up, after having gone to get a drink at the little stream that runs through here. There's a regular place where we bend down to drink; and I can just see you taking off that campaign hat of yours, laying it nicely on the bank, getting your fill of water; and then deliberately coming back to camp, leaving your hat there; and then you kick up the greatest racket because you suddenly notice it isn't on your head!"

Some of the other boys clapped their hands, while Step Hen looked foolish at the well-merited rebuke.

"Mebbe you're right that time, Thad," he said, meekly, as, turning, he strode from the briskly burning fire, heading toward the good spot alongside the little stream, where they knelt to drink.

It was perhaps half a minute afterwards when he was heard to give a screech that brought every

scout instantly to his feet, jumping for their guns, when they caught the meaning of his words:

"I've got him!" yelled Step Hen, at the top of his voice; "I'm holding him, all right! But come and give me a hand, somebody, or he'll get away! Injuns! Injuns!"

No wonder that excitement filled the camp of the Silver Fox Patrol!

CHAPTER VII.

STEP HEN MAKES A CAPTURE.

"Wow! it's a regular attack! Keep hold of your guns, boys, and make every bullet count!" whooped the excited Giraffe.

"Don't anybody fire a single shot without orders!" roared Thad, who could never tell what such a fly-up-the-creek as Giraffe was capable of doing, once he got started.

The guide led the way toward the spot where Step Hen still continued to shout and entreat. All of the boys had seen fit to arm themselves. Even Smithy, who had no gun, had seized upon the camp hatchet, and imagined himself looking exceedingly warlike as he trotted along in the wake of his com-

rades, making violent passes in the air, as though cutting down imaginary enemies by the score.

They thus came upon Step Hen; and sure enough he was clinging to the back of an Indian, both arms being twisted desperately around the latter's dusky neck in a way that threatened to choke the other. Step Hen may never have read about the way the Old Man of the Sea clung to Sinbad the Sailor, using both arms and legs to maintain his hold; but Thad thought, when he had his first glimpse of the picture, that at any rate the scout was a good sticker.

But then the Indian did not seem to be doing anything on his part to ward off the attack; indeed, he was standing there, bearing his burden with that stoical indifference peculiar to his race. There was no smile on his sober face that Thad could see; but he imagined that the Indian must surely appreciate the ridiculous nature of the situation.

"All right, Step Hen," Thad called out, when he could make himself heard above the tremendous racket the other was putting up; "we're here to save you, guns and all. You can let go your grip, Step Hen!"

"But you won't let him get away, will you, Thad?" pleaded the other, earnestly. "He's my Injun, don't you know; I captured him all by myself. I just bet you now he was meanin' to hook

my hat, that's what brought him to the creek; but I jumped on him, and took him by surprise. Surround him, fellers, while I let him loose. My! but he's a tricky one, I tell you; pretended never to fight back a bit; but he was only watching for his chance. He didn't know who had hold of him, and that I was on to his game, all right."

"Stop talking, and let him go; you're half choking him, Step Hen!" ordered the patrol leader.

And knowing that Thad meant business when he used his official tones, Step Hen suddenly released his clutch, and jumped back, just as if he really expected his late captive to whirl and attack him.

But nothing of the kind occurred. In fact, the Indian continued to show the utmost indifference to the fact that a ring of eager faces surrounded him; and that guns of various makes and kinds were thrust out at him, until the circle seemed to fairly bristle with a warlike atmosphere.

Thad saw the Indian raise his right hand, holding the palm toward them, and keeping the thumb flat at the same time.

"That's the peace sign!" muttered Toby Smathers; "he ain't lookin' for trouble, I reckons, boys."

"Huh! he better not," grunted Giraffe, who had been amusing himself meanwhile in raising and lowering the hammer of his heavy rifle, as though he must have something going in order to work off

his nervousness. "Why, we could eat him alive, and then not half try. Ten to one is mighty heavy odds, let me tell you. And no wonder he holds out the white flag. It's easy to surrender when you ain't got a show. But I'd go slow about trusting him, Thad; these here Injuns, I've heard, are a treacherous lot, take 'em as a whole."

"Keep still, Giraffe!" said the scoutmaster, sternly; "let me do the talking," and the tall scout became mute, for the time being at least; though it was hard to keep him any length of time in that condition.

Thad had already made a discovery. The moonlight fell upon the Indian, who now stood there with his arms folded, his whole attitude one of studied indifference; and it struck the patrol leader that there was something very familiar about him.

"Allan, isn't he the young brave we saw hovering around our camp before, and who wouldn't stop to be questioned?" he asked, turning to the Maine boy.

"I was just thinking of that myself when you spoke, Thad," came the ready answer.

"I wonder, now, why he keeps on hanging after us," the scoutmaster remarked. "And I'm going to ask him first of all."

With that he turned to the prisoner, and went on to say:

"Can you understand; do you know what I am saying?"

"Yes, can speak same, all right," came the answer, in pretty fair English.

"Well, we want to know why you are hanging about our camp so much. Once before we saw you, and tried to talk with you, but you moved off. Now, away up here in the mountains you come again, sneaking around, and taking chances of being shot for a prowling wolf. Tell us why you do this? I don't believe you meant to steal anything because you've made no attempt to creep into the camp; but we want to know just why you hang around this way."

"Make come back more two, three times, look at teepee, see fine picture there. Never see like before. Much good! Ugh! P'raps sell same, bimeby, when go back!"

"What under the sun does he mean by that talk, Thad? Sure we ain't in the picture selling business. even if I am taking some dandy snapshots. I wonder, now, has he seen me at work; does he think I'm a traveling photograph man, and wants me to strike him off, in his warpaint and feathers?"

Davy Jones managed to say all of this, but no one was paying much attention to his remarks.

"Tell you what, fellers," broke in the irrepressible Giraffe, just then; "he's taken a shine to our tents, and wants to buy one when we're done with

'em. Knows a good thing when he sees it, he does. Just as if we'd let 'em go for a song, when they're cram full of associations for us."

"You're not on to it yet, boys;" remarked Thad, quietly; "it's the head of the fox which we had painted so cleverly on each tent that's caught his eye; and he just can't help hanging around, to keep on gazing at it, for some reason or other."

For the first time they saw a sign of emotion flit across the face of the young Indian brave. He struck himself violently on the chest.

"Me Fox!" he exclaimed, proudly. "Soon me must have teepee for self. See picture fox on same, think can buy. Give much pelt for same. Ugh! what white boy say?"

"Well, just to think of it, here's another Fox, all right?" called out Giraffe. "We're treading on his heels, so to speak, boys, when we take that name for our patrol. Glad to meet up with you; and by the way are you Silver Fox, Red Fox, or Black Fox; though to be sure they all belong to one family?"

"I thought I ought to know him," burst out Aleck Rawson, pushing forward, "and now I'm dead sure of it. Hello! Fox, you sure must remember me, Aleck; and the good times we used to have, when I lived close to the Reservation?"

The young Indian extended his hand without hesitation.

"No forget Aleck, not much. But him not with other white boys down in big timber. Where come by? How do? Much glad see again. My coyote pony, Flicker, yet in the run. Ugh! Shake!"

"He means a pony I gave him when we came away from that place," explained Aleck, turning to Thad after gravely shaking hands with the Indian. "The Fox is a Crow, and one of the smartest boys you ever saw. He can do everything that a grown warrior could; and some day they say he will be a chief in his tribe. We used to have great times racing our ponies, and chasing coyotes over the prairie. And I'm right glad to see him once more; though it puzzles me to know why he is up here, so far away from the homes of his people; and armed, too."

"Well, if he's an old friend of yours, Aleck, and you can vouch for him, why, of course he's going to be welcome at our fire. And it tickles me to think that the bright painting of the fox head on each of our tents was what attracted his eye, so that he just *couldn't* keep from hanging around at that other time. But surely that didn't draw him away up here; he's got some other business in his head; for he only discovered our camp just now, and was coming in to see us, I reckon, when Step Hen mounted his back, and then called to us to help him."

"Anyway, I had him gripped good and tight, you

all saw," grumbled Step Hen. "When these good husky arms of mine get locked around anything, it takes a heap to break me away. If he had been a hostile Injun I'd a hung on like grim death, believe me."

No one ventured to try and take away any of his laurels. He had certainly yelled for help in a way that could not easily be excelled, they all thought.

Thad led the way to the fire, after inviting the Indian to join them. He confessed to having just a little curiosity himself as to what had caused the Fox to desert the teepees of his tribe, and wander so far away from the reservation; but of course Thad knew better than to ask about the personal affairs of the other. If the Fox chose, later on, to take them into his confidence, well and good. He might only stay with them for a night, and then slip away; but since he was Aleck's friend, and seemed to be connected with the great family of Foxes, of which they were a Boy Scout branch, why, he would be welcome.

As the Indian confessed that he had not broken his fast since noon, when he had munched a handful of dried deer meat, known as pemmican; some of the boys took it upon themselves to cook something for him. He appeared to be very grateful, and could be seen to sniff the air eagerly while the coffee was boiling; showing that he appreciated the white man's drink at its true value; for his

people on the reservation enjoyed many of the comforts of civilization, and some of the luxuries, too, even to pianos that played themselves, and boxes that sang songs, and played the violin, and gave all sorts of orchestral music, so Aleck observed.

And while the boys talked on various subjects, as they sat around, Thad happened to be watching the face of the Fox when one of the scouts casually mentioned the name of Colonel Kracker. He actually saw the dark face grow stern, and that the Indian ground his teeth together, as if in anger.

Seeing which Thad put things together, and came to a conclusion, whether right or wrong, of course he could not yet say.

"He knows Kracker, for he started when Davy mentioned the name," Thad was saying to himself. "And the chances are that the prospector has done something to injure the Fox, or some member of his family. These Indians hate savagely; and perhaps this young fellow, hardly more than a boy, has taken to the warpath, bent on having a settlement with the big bully. Well, it isn't any of our business; but I know I'd hate to have the Fox camping on *my* trail, with hatred burning in his heart."

CHAPTER VIII.

PLANNING WOE TO THE BIG HORNS.

"If we get along in this way," Giraffe was saying, as he sat there watching the young Indian eat what had been set before him; "two at a pop, not that they're just as welcome as the showers in April, though, we'll have to hustle some lively so's to provide grub."

"Keepin' open house, Giraffe!" sang out Davy Jones, looking up from his job of placing another new film in his snapshot camera.

"Well, we've got our sign out to the Foxes; that's right," grinned the other, as he glanced proudly at the head that had been painted in really a clever fashion on the canvas of each tent.

They sat up a while longer, an canvassed the situation; but the hour getting late, and several of the boys showing signs of being sleepy, it was finally decided that they had better turn in.

So Bumpus had to pretend to blow "taps," with his fist for a bugle; and as usual he acquitted himself splendidly. The young Indian's eyes sparkled when he heard that imitation of the real thing; and Thad imagined the Fox must at some time or

other have rubbed up against the regular cavalry of the United States Army, so that he understood what Bumpus was doing.

Thad and Allan had arranged matters with the guide, so that there would be some one on guard at all hours of the night. With those three men hovering near, there could be no telling what might happen. While they were not outlaws, or anything of that sort; still, after learning how they had treated poor Aleck, just because he very rightly refused to give up the secret of the mine that was his mother's property, and on which Kracker did not have the slightest claim, Thad could give a pretty good guess as to the character of the men.

The guide had told him more than enough to stamp Kracker in his mind as a very unprincipled man. Thad believed the prospector was so determined to discover the hidden silver mine that there was almost nothing he would not attempt in order to carry out his designs. And since their camp now sheltered the boy against whom all his animosity seemed to be aroused, it was at least possible that he might pay them a visit, backed by his followers, men quite as reckless as himself.

So it would seem to be the part of wisdom to keep on the watch for danger. It is the principle of scouts to avoid trouble, rather than seek it; and Thad believed in the old saying that "an ounce

of prevention is always better than a pound of cure."

But the night passed, and nothing happened.

None of the others were called upon to take a turn as sentries; indeed more than one of the boys slept like a log all that night, and never dreamed there was any watch being kept. Still, when in the morning they ascertained this fact, they reproached the scoutmaster for not having called upon them to share the vigil; since they always wished to do their share of the work.

Thad knew that the coming of Aleck Rawson was bound to add to the excitement of their stay in the mountains; but he had already taken a great liking for the boy, and admired his sturdy independence, as well as his grim determination to once more locate the long hidden mine for the benefit of his mother and sisters.

Come what might, Thad was not sorry the Silver Foxes had determined, individually and collectively that they would back up Aleck to the limit; and even give over some of the time they had expected to put in hunting, in order to help him take possession of his father's silver lode.

That meant then, sooner or later, a visit from the bully of the mountains, this arrogant Colonel Kracker, whom so many men seemed to fear as a terror; though Thad had already conceived the idea that the other must be a coward at heart. He

fancied that no really brave man would war on a widow like he was doing; and torture a mere boy, in order to force him to betray his mother's secret.

"Let him come, then, if he wants to," Thad had said to Allan, when they discussed the subject for the tenth time, while breakfast was being made ready. "We're able to take care of ourselves, I should think—eight husky fellows, a brave man for a guide, who will stand up for us; then Aleck, and the Fox besides. It would be mighty queer, now, if we couldn't hold our own against three men, no matter if they are tough characters."

"Oh! I guess we've seen just as bad before," replied Allan, with a confident smile. "How about some of those moonshiners down in North Carolina? And tell me about that Charlie Barnes and his crowd, the hobo yeggs we ran across up in Maine. Then, remember Si Kedge and Ed Harkness the game poachers we met later on; and how they were sorry they'd ever bothered with the Silver Foxes? And to wind up the list, Thad, there were Hank Dodge and his French Canadian half breed pard, Pierre Laporte, the hard-shelled timber cruisers, who gave us all that bother when Bumpus lost himself down in the big timber. How's that for a crowd, tell me; and didn't we come out on top every time?"

Thad laughed.

"I see you've got it all down pretty pat, Allan,"

he remarked. "And sure enough, just as you say, after getting the better of so many bad men in all our travels, we hadn't ought to feel worried right now because three more bob up, and think to throw a scare into us. On the whole, this Kracker had better keep his hands off, or he'll be sorry."

"But how about our hunting?" Allan went on to say. "Some of the boys are getting anxious to make a try for a big-horn. Why, there's Smithy, a fellow we never expected would ever take the least interest in shooting, because his nature has seemed so mild, and sissy-like—I even heard him declare he wanted to make a try and see what he could do. Owned up that his father used to be a great hunter years ago; but that he guessed he'd inherited his mother's gentle disposition; while his hobble-dehoy sister she wants to play baseball, hockey, tennis, and those kinds of games all the while. And Thad, I think we ought to encourage that idea in Smithy. It may be the making of him, if once he gets waked up."

Thad thought the same way. He knew the boy possessed amiable traits; but he had always been given too much to dress, and the little things of life, at which most fellows look with scorn and contempt. He must have the edges roughened a little, if he was ever going to hold his own when he went to college, or out in the wide world, where "sissy" boys are held up to derision.

"Nothing to hinder our hanging over here a bit, and seeing what the next move of this cannon cracker is going to be," he remarked.

"And the hunting?" asked Allan.

"Why, a party could start out right from camp here, leaving enough behind to defend the place, of course, and keep Kracker from taking Aleck away by sheer force, if he did have the nerve enough to come here," the scoutmaster replied, after thinking over the matter for a brief time.

"Of course we ought to let the guide go along with the boys; for I wouldn't like to trust them alone in the mountains," Allan suggested.

"That's right," added Thad. "Some of them seem to have a weakness for getting into all sorts of trouble from the word go. We can let one party start out, and after they come back, if they've had any luck, and the air's cleared some around here, why, another might take a different direction. You said Step Hen was wild to get a big horn, didn't you, Allan?"

"Never saw him so set on anything; but then that's his way always. When he gets a notion in that brain box of his, you can't knock it out with a sledge hammer. And just now it seems that a real Rocky Mountain sheep with the big horns beats any old grizzly all hollow, with Step Hen."

"All right, we'll have to let him be one of the first party. He did so splendidly when he jumped

on the back of the Fox, and captured him, he thinks, that some reward ought to be coming his way. And there's Smithy, I'll see that he has his chance to try a shot. Giraffe could lend him his gun; or Bob White's would do because it's a much lighter weapon than the other."

"And how about Davy Jones; he says he's just bound to get some pictures of big-horns on their native rocks, or making some of those famous leaps he's heard so much about; can he be one of the bunch, Thad?"

"Yes, but that is the limit. Three frisky scouts will be about all that any one guide can keep tabs on, I rather think," replied the other, smiling as he tried to picture Toby Smathers endeavoring to hold the ambitious photographer, and the pair of would-be big-horn hunters, in check; for he imagined the task might resemble a circus feat of trying to drive half a dozen steeds at the same time.

When the plan of campaign for the day was made known, there was considerable rejoicing, and a little grumbling. Of course the former came from those who had been lucky enough to draw prizes; while the discontent sprang from Giraffe, who had also cherished certain aspirations, looking to a pair of elegant big-horns, to decorate his den at home in Cranford.

But if Giraffe did occasionally show a spirit like this, the best thing about him was the rapidity with

which he got over the "grumbles," as Step Hen called his little fits of the sulks. In five minutes he had apparently forgotten his disappointment, and was offering to loan Smithy his rifle, even before the scoutmaster had mentioned anything about it.

However, it was judged too heavy for a greenhorn to pack around all day; and in order that Giraffe might not feel offended, Thad smoothed matters down, as usual, by administering a little dose of flattery.

"He's only a new beginner, Giraffe, and not used to toting a gun. Why, his shoulder would be sore from carrying it all day. With an old hand like you, it's a different matter; and I rather think that gun just seems to fit into a notch on your shoulder, like it grew there. Now, Bob's gun is much lighter; and with those mushroom bullets, the small bore doesn't matter a bit. So we'll let him take that. Besides, if anything happened here that spelled trouble, you'd feel pretty sore if you didn't have your faithful old shooting-iron at hand."

"That's so, Thad; reckon you're just about right," said the tall scout, instantly, quite mollified. "And Bob's gun'll seem more like a playtoy to Smithy, too. I always said mine was a man's gun; and when you pull the trigger there's bound to be something doing."

In this clever way then, did Thad frequently stave off trouble and ill feeling among his followers. It

requires much tact to successfully manage a pack of boys, representing all manner of dispositions. And the scoutmaster who is the most successful in his line of business, is the one who knows boys best, and has the happy faculty of entering into their ways of looking at things, heart and soul.

During the progress of eating breakfast the talk was of course pretty much all about hunting the big horn. The guide was called upon to narrate all he knew concerning the famous Rocky Mountain sheep, often called goats by the hunters; and which combine many of the traits of the noted chamois of the Alps and the Appenines, with others that are peculiar to themselves.

Any one who has seen them leap boldly from a ledge, and strike upon their great rounded horns far below, is ready to declare that there is not a remarkable spectacle in all the world of wild sport that can equal the sight.

Possibly the Fox knew something concerning these queer mountain sheep; but as Giraffe said aside to Step Hen, " it would needs be a monstrous lemon squeezer that could ever hope to extract any information from an Indian." Aleck, on his part, had often heard stories told about the animals now occupying so prominent a part in the conversation of the scouts; and he did not hesitate to hand over any information he had it in his power to divulge,

hoping that it might serve a useful purpose to the intended hunters.

Davy was thrusting several more rolls of films in his haversack.

"No telling what a feller may run up against, once you start out," he remarked.

"The only trouble is, Davy," commented Giraffe, "you can't make a meal off'n the things, if you're hungry, and game shy. I think Step Hen did a wise thing when he stuffed all he could get of eatables in his bag. And Smithy too carries a lot. Oh! you'll do, now. Thad says you'd better wait about half an hour, till the mists clear off'n the mountains. It's real early, anyhow, and the sheep ain't agoin' to run away; don't you worry about that."

There is nothing that bothers a boy more than having to wait, when he's all ready to do something. The minutes seem to drag as though they were leaden weighted. If Davy unfastened that knapsack of his once to examine its contents, and make sure he had neglected nothing, he did it half a dozen times, until Giraffe declared he would certainly wear the straps out if he kept that up.

Those who expected to remain in camp were going about their usual vocations, as for instance the cleaning up of the breakfast tin pans, and cooking utensils. When a company of eleven souls has been having a meal, these amount to considerable;

and it took Bob White, Allan and Bumpus some little time to accomplish the task of setting things to rights.

Bumpus had gone to get some more water from the stream, and when he came back he was grinning broadly.

"Why, you see," he explained, "there's an old rattlesnake coiled up over there, and I've been making him as mad as hops, poking at him with a pole. You just ought to come and see him strike, though!"

"I heard him rattle!" declared Thad," but somehow I just thought it was a locust waking up. Come on, boys, and let's put such a dangerous customer out of the way!"

CHAPTER IX.

BAITING A RATTLESNAKE.

Of course they all hastened after the scoutmaster and Bumpus; the latter really leading the way, with a consequential way about him, as though he felt that he ought to be looked upon as master of ceremonies, by right of first discovery.

"Here's the pole I had, when I poked him," he remarked, picking it up as he spoke.

"But where's the rattler?" demanded Giraffe,

just as swift as that; for he was always as quick as lightning in his ways. "Show the old fraud to us, will you? Must a slipped away while you came to camp with the water."

"Huh!" sneered Step Hen, "I'd rather believe now, Bumpus don't know a rattler when he sees one. P'raps it was only an innocent little garter snake he was pokin', and a locust was singin' in a tree all the while."

Bumpus looked furious. He had lately gained quite an envious reputation for a remarkable knowledge of woodcraft; and he was up in arms at the idea of being thus placed once more in the tenderfoot class.

"Think I don't know a genuine rattlesnake when I see one, do you; well, what d'ye think of a feller that'd jump over a log without even lookin', and when a common garden variety of black snake gave him a jab, he hollered that he was poisoned by a terrible rattler, and could even see his poor leg swellin' up right before his eyes. Me not know one, when I've been in the Zoo reptile house down in New York, and even watched one swallow a rat! Well, I guess you're away off, Step Hen Bingham."

"Yes," put in Thad just then, "and it's too early in the day for a locust to be in the noise business; I ought to have thought of that myself, I own up. Let's look around, boys, and locate the thing; but be mighty careful how you step. I can cure a

good many things with the few little remedies I carry; but excuse me from having to tackle a regular dose of rattlesnake poison."

"It *is* a bad thing, I tells ye, lads," asserted Toby Smathers, who had come along with the rest, even the Indian boy being present. "Many's the time, years ago, I've seen the Injuns getting poison from a rattler, so's to make their war arrows more deadly. An' I tells ye, it war worth watchin'. If so be we kin find this critter, I'll show ye how 'twas done, if Mr. Scout Master sez so."

"First get your rabbit, before you start to cooking him," laughed Thad.

Just then Giraffe let out a whoop.

"Here he is, all coiled up again, and looking wicked, now, I tell you!" he called out; and the others rushed in that quarter.

"Well, he is a sorter big un for the mountains, sure enough," admitted the guide after he had taken a look. "Wait here a bit till I come back with a piece of deer meat, and I'll show ye how 'twas done. Keep him riled-up like, but not strikin' too hard at that pole, or he'll empty his pizen sack on it."

Thad had himself heard more or less about such things; or else read of them in stories of the old-time Indians, the Iroquois, Delawares, Shawanees and other tribes who disputed the way of the early pioneers; and he was just as eager to watch the process as any of the other boys.

The rattlesnake was coiled, just as they always are when danger hovers near; because, when caught at full length, the reptile is next to harmless, since it cannot strike and make use of its only means of defense, its poison fangs.

Thad saw to it that no one approached near enough to be in any danger. Once the pole was extended by Bumpus, just to show his mates how he had been baiting the awful looking thing. Instantly that flat head sprang out toward the object; and as Bumpus adroitly drew it away, remembering the injunction of the guide, the rattlesnake, finding nothing to strike, was thrown half its length out of coil. It was almost laughable to see with what haste it managed to curl up again, and with that rattle buzzing furiously, seemed to defy anything to touch it.

Then Toby Smathers came hurrying up. He was fastening a piece of venison (which had been left over several days, and kept well in the dry mountain air,) to another long pole, which he had secured; not wishing to handle the one that had already been struck numerous times by the fangs of the snake.

"Now you're going to have something worth while to mudge at, old feller!" cried Bumpus, as he threw his pole away, and pushed a little closer in the ring, anxious to see all that went on.

Toby was soon ready. He thrust the pole out,

and all of them could hear the sound of the concussion as the reptile struck the piece of meat fastened at the end. It made most of the boys shudder just to contemplate being hit such a venomous blow with all the fury of a maddened reptile.

Again and again did Toby cause the snake to repeat the blow, turning the meat around several ways, so that it might all be impregnated by the virus.

"Now that's about done," he said; "and the quicker ye kill that crazy thing the easier I'll feel. Lost a partner once when on a range tending forests for the Government, and ever since I've got a grudge agin rattlers."

Thereupon Bumpus once more picked up his long pole and aimed a vicious blow at the raised head of the snake. Taking the creature fairly across the neck he sent it spinning away.

"Look out there!" shouted Giraffe, giving a hop, skip and a jump in another direction; "he may be playing possum on us! Keep clear of him, everybody; and you, Bumpus, hit him again as hard as you can. It ain't the easiest thing agoin' to kill a snake, let me tell you."

Accordingly the fat scout raised his pole, and brought it down several times with might and main, on the neck of the fearful looking reptile; until finally Thad declared that it was beyond ever doing any harm again.

"And the rattle belongs to Bumpus, if he cares to claim it," said the scoutmaster. "It isn't a pretty thing, but then every time he looks at it, he'll be apt to remember this occasion, and can picture the camp, the mountains, and all the rest of it."

"Including Mike and Molly, our gentle pack mules," added Giraffe; immediately bending down to assist Bumpus secure his prize.

"Now, you see," said the guide, as he held up the piece of fresh venison so as to show the streaks of green, where the terrible poison had permeated it," after they done this, the reds used to jest let the meat lie till it was old and soft, and chuck full of pizen. Then all they had to do was to push the point of an arrow into the same, and dry it in the sun. But I'm told they never do such things any more, which I take it is a good job. Thar be some things that seem too tough even for savages to use in war; and pizen is one of 'em, I reckons."

"For goodness sake bury it, Toby!" begged Smithy, turning pale as he contemplated the object the guide was holding up. "And I surely hope we will not have the misfortune to run across any of the same breed while we're stalking those strange big-horn sheep."

"Not much danger, because rattlers they's apt at this time of year to kim down to damp places, when they kin find such," the guide explained; but at

Thad's request he did put the piece of venison underground.

"If later on some hungry wolf digs it up, why, I'm sorry for that same beast," Giraffe remarked, as they returnd once more to the camp.

"Must be near time for us to skip out," said Step Hen, giving the scoutmaster a look of entreaty, as though imploring Thad to be merciful, and cut their waiting short.

"Five minutes yet before the half hour is gone," declared Allan.

An exclamation from the Indian drew their attention just then. The Fox was pointing, and on following the direction of his extended brown finger the boys saw what had caught his always vigilant eyes.

Away up on the top of the cliff that towered so many hundred feet above its base several figures were moving. They were plainly men, and white men at that. No need for any one to dart into the tent, and get the field glass, in order to know who these parties were, though Thad did secure it, as he wished a closer view.

"It's sure that Krackerjack crowd!" cried Giraffe. "Better get a move on, Aleck, and drop out of sight before they glimpse you."

But the other shook his head.

"It's too late for that now," he declared.

"Kracker has got a spy glass leveled at this camp right now; and he's sure glimpsed me before this."

And when Thad a minute later looked through the field glasses at the three who were on the cliff he saw that Aleck had spoken truly; for even then the biggest of the trio was watching them through a pair of glasses.

Now and then he would turn, to say something to one of his companions. These fellows, known as Waffles and Dickey Bird respectively, were not in the same class with the giant Kracker, with regard to size; though as to reputation, possibly they were able to run him a close race; since they were all looked upon as a pretty bad lot by the settlers and miners with whom they came in contact.

"Wonder what he thinks?" remarked Davy Jones, who seemed almost tempted to try and use his kodak on the party, only his good sense told him they would look like specks at such a great distance, and there would be no satisfaction in the picture.

"How d'ye expect they ever found that Aleck was no longer on the ledge?" asked Step Hen.

"Perhaps they may have been in camp somewhere, that gave them a view of the ledge, and looking in vain for Aleck, they hurried up to see whether he had fallen, or was climbing up someway or other," Allan suggested.

"And the chances are, they'll want to drop in

here, now that they know he's taken up with us?" said Giraffe.

Step Hen looked anxious.

"Say, Thad, is that agoin' to interfere with our startin' out on our little excursion?" he demanded.

The scoutmaster knew what was in his mind. He smiled as he replied:

"Oh! I don't see why it should, Step Hen. Fact is, the time's up now; and as I've said all I want to about taking care of yourselves, why you might as well make a start. There'll be enough of us left behind to take care of Colonel Kracker and his friends, if so be they do chance to call on us."

"Bring us back some nice juicy mutton, Step Hen!" called Giraffe.

"And Davy, be sure you snap 'em off in the air; we ain't from Missouri, but we like to be shown," added Bumpus.

"I say, Smithy, the country expects every man to do his duty, suh; and if you get your chance, I give you my word, suh, that little gun can be depended on every single time!" shouted the Southerner, Bob White.

And so, followed by the good wishes of their chums, the little party of big-horn hunters started forth, none knowing what strange events might be waiting for them among the wild uplifts of the Rockies.

CHAPTER X.

THE COMING OF KRACKER.

"THEY'RE sure comin', Thad!"

The scoutmaster looked up when Giraffe said this.

"Oh! you must mean that big cannon Kracker, and his two friends?" he remarked, in such a cool tone that Giraffe fairly gasped for breath.

"That's them!" he declared, with an utter disregard for grammar that would have caused him to lose some of his good points in school had the lapse occurred there. "And my stars! they look ugly enough to eat us all up, without caring for bones!"

"But I calculate they won't, all the same," replied the other, smiling with supreme confidence. "Did Allan send you in to tell me?" he continued, for he had delegated the second in command to keep watch and ward when he was busy in his tent doing something.

Giraffe nodded his head violently; indeed, any one who did not know how tenacious a hold it had on that long neck, might have been alarmed lest he dislocate his vertebra through such contortions.

"Yep; and he said you was to come out and see for yourself," Giraffe went on.

"All right, I will then."

Thad quietly picked up his little twelve-bore Marlin before quitting the tent; and there was an air of business about his manner of doing so quite different from the fussy way Giraffe had of doing things, but which was apt to appear much more convincing in the eyes of any one who could read character fairly well.

When the scoutmaster reached the open air he found quite a buzz of excitement around the confines of the little camp. It seemed as though the scouts must certainly be anticipating something in the line of trouble; because every one who had a gun was nervously fingering the weapon, and watching the coming of the three figures stalking toward the camp from across the little valley.

There was Giraffe, first of all, gripping his big rifle eagerly, a grim look on his thin face; Bumpus had his ten-gauge Marlin clenched tightly in his hands, and perhaps some of the usual color was missing from his fat face; but he had a reputation to sustain now, and knew he must toe the mark like a little man; Allan had his rifle in evidence; and Aleck having lost his at the time he was captured, was keeping a hand close to one of his pockets in which reposed a small revolver which one of the other scouts had loaned him.

Bob White did not have a gun either, since he had let Smithy go off with his; but he did not mean to be caught defenseless, should trouble arise; and back of him he was holding that handy camp hatchet.

The Fox,—well, if he was anywhere around the camp, Thad failed to discover him; and even at that exciting moment the scoutmaster remembered thinking that perhaps the Crow boy had hidden, not wishing any of the Kracker crowd to see him.

Thad glanced around him. He had considered the situation before this, like the wise general who notes down in his mind the promising points connected with his chosen field of battle.

Speaking a few words to Allan, who knew what the plan of campaign was to be, Thad sent the other over to a clump of rocks, from the crest of which, not more than fifty feet away, he could have a splendid and unobstructed view of the camp, as well as its surroundings. Indeed, hardly a snake could have crawled across that open space without being exposed to the sharp eyes of the Maine boy.

Then Thad awaited the coming of the three men.

Just as Giraffe had declared, he could easily see that they were all looking more or less angry. The big man in the middle interested him much more than either of the others, of course; because he knew very well that when Colonel Kracker took snuff, it was up to Waffles and Dickey Bird to

sneeze; for they were only shadows of the leader, who always controlled their actions.

Thad had never seen just such a man before; but for all that he believed that what he had said before was the truth. Red-faced, and looking like a big hurricane let loose on the land, still back of all this outward display of fierceness Thad felt sure there lay a really cowardly heart. Yes, no brave man would act as Kracker had done, and when it came right down to the point of facing death, he was pretty sure to quail.

Thad turned, and spoke a few reassuring words to Aleck.

"Remember, we don't mean to let him lay a finger on you, boy. I've drawn a line out between that rock, and the scrub oak over yonder; and if he crosses that we're going to make him wish he hadn't. There'll be some work for me to do picking bird shot out of his fat legs, and binding up his other wounds; for we've sure got to stop him coming in to this camp, no matter what happens!"

It was a remarkable situation for the acting scoutmaster of a troop of Boy Scouts to find himself in. Very few others could ever say they had gone through a like experience, Thad thought. But then, that was no reason he and his mates were bound to let this tyrant walk rough-shod over them, and take Aleck away, to continue his harsh and inhuman treatment of the lad. No, if it were neces-

sary, in order to avoid such a catastrophe overtaking them, he must give the command to fire on the enemy, much as he would ever regret the necessity for such a step.

He wondered what the leading lights in the great organization would say, should the circumstances ever be placed before them; but then, scouts should acquit themselves manfully under any and all conditions; and that was just what Thad meant to do now.

The men were now close enough to make sure that those facing them were only boys. Thad could see that Kracker was looking closely, as though anxious to settle that point first of all; and it agreed exactly with the opinion he already entertained for the big prospector; namely, that he was what Giraffe would call "a wind-bag," or a puff-ball, like those every one has stepped on in the fields, that go off with a pop, emit a little cloud of dust, and then collapse.

But what was there to be feared from a mere parcel of half-grown boys? Kracker doubtless believed that he could awe them with that fierce look of his, and the domineering way he had of holding himself erect; while it was almost certain that when they heard his awful voice, sounding like hoarse thunder, their very legs would tremble under them, so that their knees must knock together.

But apparently no one was doing much trem-

bling, as yet, for they seemed to stand there in a line, and holding their guns half raised, with the stocks hitched under their shoulders, in the manner of those who have hunted much, and know which might be the easiest method of flinging a gun to rest in a second of time.

One of the men had a rifle. He was the fellow whom Thad guessed went by the name of Dickey Bird. But then, no doubt both Kracker and Waffles carried smaller arms about their persons somewhere, for Thad could see signs of their belts, and judged the heavy revolvers were swung back of them, where a hand could sweep around and lay hold of the butt easily.

The scoutmaster had made up his mind that Kracker was the only one whom they had to fear in the least. With him removed from the game, the other two would turn out to be easily handled. In fact, they would probably throw up their hands in surrender the very instant anything happened to take the big man off. And accordingly Thad meant to devote all his energies toward cutting the claws of the colonel. He had given Allan his ideas on the subject, and the Maine boy agreed with him fully.

They were coming close to the imaginary dead line Thad had marked between that pile of rocks and the stunted tree. Half a minute more, and he felt that he must call a halt.

Would they mind what he said; or, thinking that orders from a mere boy were not to be taken seriously, would they insist on advancing further?

Thad gritted his teeth, and was more resolved than ever that if Kracker invited trouble he would get it, good and hard. He would find out that guns can be just as dangerous in the hands of boys, as men.

But now he noticed that the big man had slowed up a little. Perhaps he did not just like the way they stood there waiting, and with so many guns handy, too.

Thad deliberately cocked his shotgun. The sound of the hammer clicking could be plainly heard, just as the boy intended it should; and there was something terribly business-like and significant about it.

At any rate, Colonel Kracker reduced his pace another notch, as if in answer to an unspoken challenge. He was not so brave inwardly as his fierce outward appearance would seem to indicate.

His eyes were glued upon the figure of young Aleck, who stood beside Thad, just a step to the rear, possibly. And apparently Kracker was trying to throw all the force of his domineering character into that glare. It was really enough to frighten one into fits, Thad thought; but somehow it did not make him even tremble, because he believed surface indications often told what was not true.

"Keep on giving him back look for look, Aleck!" was what Thad said in a low tone, intended only for the ear of the boy they had rescued from the cliff ledge.

"Oh! I ain't afraid of him now; he couldn't make me squirm when I was all alone, and in his power; so it ain't likely I'm shivering, now that I've got so many friends to back me up," answered the other, also in a hoarse whisper.

"Good for you!" Thad sent back.

At the same time he coughed.

This had been arranged as a signal for the rest of those who carried guns, to raise them to their shoulders. The action itself ought to convince Kracker that he had reached the limit of the peace line; and that if he persisted in advancing any further, he might expect something to happen.

It worked splendidly. The big man came to an abrupt halt, and of course so did Waffles, and Dickey Bird too. Thad did not think much of the last mentioned; but the other fellow looked to be just such a sort of "second fiddle" whom a man like Kracker would choose to assist him in his schemes, that were so often evil.

And they were right on that imaginary line Thad had marked out, too; had they persisted in advancing three more feet he meant to call out sharply, and warn them to pull up.

Slowly Kracker elevated that fat right hand of

his. Many a time, no doubt it had given some poor wretch cause for trembling when he pointed that finger at him. Just now, with those terrible eyes of his glued upon Aleck, he made his forefinger move, once, twice, three times, in a significant beckoning gesture.

Then he spoke, and his deep-toned voice was not unlike the rumble of thunder at a time the lightning is darting among the heavy storm clouds.

"Come here!"

CHAPTER XI.

HELD AT BAY.

"DONT move, Aleck!" said Thad, instantly, and he raised his voice enough, to purposely let the three men hear what he said.

Of course the boy did not budge. Perhaps he even gave Kracker back look for look, only that there may have been a smile of contempt upon his boyish face.

"Don't you hear what I say, come here!" roared the colonel.

"He hears you all right, but he feels quite satisfied to stay where he is," said Thad, in a cool tone.

The other turned those blazing eyes on the speaker.

"Who asked you to put your finger in my business?" he demanded, harshly.

"I'm not. It's you who keeps on meddling with things that concern this boy and his mother only. I suppose you are Colonel Kracker?" Thad went on.

"That's my name, and anybody who knows me would tell you that you're doing the most foolish thing in all your life, when you try to interfere with any affair on which I've set my heart. I want that boy to come to me!" and he shook his fat finger threateningly toward Aleck as he said this.

"Then you'll have to take it out in wanting, let me tell you;" replied the patrol leader, "for he belongs in this camp of Boy Scouts; and we're going to stand back of him."

If Thad was excited he certainly did not seem to be so; in fact Giraffe wondered how in the world he could command his voice so well, and speak so calmly, when on his part he was fairly shivering with the nervous tension.

"What's that you say?" shouted the big man, bristling all over with rage until he seemed to swell up larger than ever. "Why, you little imp, d'ye know what I've a good notion to do with you for this insulting talk?"

"I don't know, and neither do I care," replied Thad, "but there's one thing I do think *you* ought to know."

"Oh! you do, eh? What might that be?" demanded Kracker, sneeringly.

"Turn your head a little to the left, and you'll see a pile of rocks," the scoutmaster went on. "Now, look up on top of that pile, and you'll see a young fellow on one knee, holding a big rifle straight on you. That's one of our chums. He's from the State of Maine, where they teach boys to be able to hit a leaping deer straight in the heart every shot. Try and take just three steps this way, if you want to test his skill with the rifle. Or any one of you start to raising a gun; and my word for it you'll never know what hit you. Get that, Kracker?"

Evidently the big man saw Allan kneeling there, and holding his gun leveled. The sight did not give him any too much enjoyment, either, judging from the way some of the color faded from his face. He spluttered quite as much as before, but he had lost a good part of his make-believe courage. In fact, Thad believed he had the big bully on the run; and he meant to press his advantage.

"If I don't get him this time, I will later on," said Kracker, giving Aleck a look of intense hatred.

"Don't you believe it," declared the scoutmaster, cheerfully. "We're going to see him through, and if it's necessary, we'll find a way of sending word to the fort, and bringing a bunch of hard-riding cavalrymen here to chase you out of the mountains. And just remember, Colonel Kracker,

there are eleven of us, all told, well armed, and knowing how to take care of ourselves. We're no city greenhorns, either, but scouts who have had a whole lot of experience in hard places. Now, if you know what is good for you, keep away from our camps, wherever they may be. Our guide, Toby Smathers, who knows you like a book, says that lots of good people would throw up their hats and cheer, if they heard you'd crossed over the line. You understand what I'm saying, I guess, don't you?"

"You're doing a fool play, young feller, believe me," spoke up the man called Waffles, thinking it was up to him to stick in his oar. "They ain't many men as would dar' talk to the kunnel like you done. Better hand the boy over to him; he's his uncle, and has a right to take charge of him."

"That's a lie!" burst out Aleck, angrily. "He came around our home, and tried every which way to get mother to just tell him what she knew about the mine, promising all sorts of shares if only she'd trust him; but since she didn't know a single thing about where it lay, and wouldn't believe him on oath, either, course she didn't make any arrangement. But he ain't any relation of mine."

"It wouldn't make any difference if he was, Aleck; when you say you don't want anything to do with Kracker, that settles it," and Thad all this while kept his eyes fixed on the big man, because he

believed the other to be just full of treachery and all kinds of trickery, so that he would be ready to do something desperate if only he thought he could take the young scoutmaster by surprise, and off his guard.

"You don't understand the matter at all," complained the big man, with something like a whine in his gruff voice now, showing that he was pretty nearly cowed.

"How is that?" demanded the other, instantly.

"I'm meaning to be his friend, and the friend of his folks," Kracker continued.

"Funny way you have of showing your friendly feelings, then, I must say," declared Thad, with scorn in his voice; "making him a prisoner, trying to force him to give up a secret you choose to think he carries; and when he refuses to take you at your word, putting him there on that ledge, to starve, or face a horrible death in perhaps falling down a couple of hundred feet."

Kracker looked a little confused, but it was only a flash in the pan. Such a thing as shame was foreign to his nature. For years he had been used to browbeating almost every person with whom he had had dealings. The fact that first of all a mere slip of a woman had dared defy him, and then her boy did the same, nettled him beyond description; and he had arrived at desperate measures at the

time Aleck, so unfortunately for the boy, fell into his hands.

And now it galled Kracker to see how he and his two helpers were being actually held up by a parcel of half grown lads. Why, it would seem as though some mockery of fate had taken hold of his fortunes, and was finding keen pleasure in adding to his humiliation.

He would have liked to rush upon these cool boyish customers, and to have trampled them under foot, as he had possibly done many men in times past, when he was less huge in his proportions, and could get around better. But somehow he did not dare attempt it.

Perhaps it was the display of weapons that awed him; and yet Colonel Kracker was accustomed to seeing such things, and knew how to take them at their true value. Then it may have been the manner of the spokesman of the little party that had so depressing an effect upon the bully. Why, what was the world coming to, when mere boys began to hold the whip hand, and shape things as they pleased?

He started to talk, but spluttered so much he could not make intelligible sounds. And his round moon face had taken on a deep red hue again, until it bordered on the purple. Thad, who had some knowledge of medicine, as we have seen on numerous occasions, really began to wonder whether the

bulky man might not be getting perilously near the border line, and taking chances with a sudden attack of apoplexy, or else something else along those lines.

Once or twice Thad had seen something move back of the three men. He dared not take his eyes off them long enough to look carefully, and at first could not decide whether it was a prowling wolf, bold enough to come thus near the camp in broad daylight; or a human being.

He even suspected at one moment that possibly the invaders might have been in greater numbers than any of the scouts dreamed; and that some of them were even then creeping around, with the idea of turning the tables on the boys by a sudden coup.

But that idea went glimmering, when he contemplated the utter impossibility of any foe crawling across the bare and open stretch of rock extending between their camp, and the foot of the rise.

It certainly could never be done; and with the Maine boy keeping watch on things from his eyrie amid the piled-up rocks.

Then what?

Why, to be sure, it must be the Fox. The young Crow had vanished, Thad remembered, at the approach of the trio of prospectors. Just where he had gone the patrol leader had neither known, nor cared, at the time. He seemed to have some reason for fearing either Kracker, or one of the two lesser

rascals with him; and appeared desirous of keeping out of their sight.

Thad also remembered that the Indian boy possessed a gun. He only hoped he would not do anything rash; but then he had been present when the scoutmaster spoke to those under him; saying that as members of the great organization that made for peace, they must not use their firearms unless as a very last resort; and then only to cripple their enemies. The Crow had nodded his head with the rest when Thad asked for this assurance; and surely an Indian keeps his word.

There, once again his head poked up into view, and this time so close to the men that Thad saw the Fox had been stealthily creeping nearer all the time.

Did he have some object in his movements, or were they caused simply by curiosity to see how close he could get, unobserved, to the one he seemed to fear?

Seeing that Kracker was too furious to even control his voice, the shorter fellow, whom Thad took to be Waffles, again put in his talk.

"It's plain to be seen you critters don't know the kunnel," he observed, bitterly, just as though he himself had had a long experience, and knew what it meant to stir up that vile temper too far. "He never gives a thing up. He's jest like a bulldog that gits a grip. Ye may chase us off this time; but

we'll stick like a plaster; and in the end git what we wants. We allers does."

"Oh! you don't say?" remarked the scoutmaster, with cutting emphasis; "well, the chances are the lot of you will get what you've been richly deserving a long time back, if you keep on meddling with our affairs. And now, suppose you skip out. We couldn't come to any agreement if we talked an hour. And we have some other things we want to do. Take your fat friend away, Waffles; he's liable to explode before long, unless you do."

Amazed at the cool defiance of the boy, the man called Waffles mechanically started to obey. But before they had taken half a dozen steps backward, Thad heard a strange, hissing sound that he could not understand. The next instant, to his astonishment, he saw Waffles pulled over backwards, his feet sprawling awkwardly. His calls for help were half muffled, and for a very good reason; since he was being partly choked by the loop of rope which the young Crow Indian had thrown over his head with so much dexterity, and then jerked tight.

CHAPTER XII.

"JUST TURNED AROUND, AND WENT AWAY!"

It was certainly a time for quick thinking, and speedy action, if the boys expected to avoid a tragedy. Naturally enough, Kracker and his one remaining companion, hearing the cries of the fallen Waffles, would think that they were being actually set upon by their enemies, and that no matter what followed, they must fight.

It was to offset this that Thad first of all turned his attention. A collision must be averted at all hazards. It would be a terrible thing if the scouts became embroiled in a fight with such men, and either received wounds, or were compelled to give them.

And so Thad, acting instantly on impulse, darted forward the very second he saw what was happening. Fortunately for all parties, the big man having been so dazed by his late baiting did not seem able to grasp the situation quickly enough to draw a weapon before Thad was upon him.

The only thing the boy did was to snatch the big six-shooter from the hand of Kracker, now trem-

bling with various emotions, in which fear may have had as much space as anger.

"Surround the other, and don't let him raise a hand, boys!" shouted the scoutmaster to those who had followed close at his heels when he thus rushed forward.

With the words he turned to where Waffles was still sprawling on the ground; but there was now more reason than ever why the fellow could not get up, because some one was sitting astride his body, and threatening him with a knife. Of course it was the Fox; and he seemed to have a storm of passion in his dark face.

But while Thad had been prompt to knock the revolver from the hand of Kracker, he was just as quick to leap alongside the young Crow boy, and grasp his wrist.

"Give me that knife, Fox!" he said sternly.

The Indian looked up in his face; for a moment it seemed as though he might be about to mutiny, and positively refuse the order; then his whim changed, and opening his fingers he allowed the shining blade to fall to the ground.

"Ugh! hunt him long time; now find, make give up what snake in the grass steal away from teepee in reservation!" he grunted, disconsolately.

"Oh! well, if he's got anything that belongs to you, or your people, why you've my full permission to search him, and get it back," Thad went on to

say, quickly; "only we want no violence here, if we can help it. We scouts generally manage to reach our ends without that, you know, Fox. Go ahead and see. We'll keep his friends quiet meanwhile, eh, boys?"

"That's what we will, Thad," said Giraffe, who was standing close by, with his gun poking almost into the ribs of the big man with the purple face. "We c'n do it to beat the band, I tell you. And here comes Allan in, to have a hand in the game. Didn't he keep a bead on the colonel here all the while; and if you hadn't jumped in, and snatched that gun away from him, I warrant Allan was just on the point of making him a one-armed man for a while."

But Thad was not paying much attention to what the talkative Giraffe said, his attention being taken up with other matters. The Fox had heard him give permission to search the pockets of the short rascal he was holding down, after having caught him in the loop of Bumpus' rope, taken slily from the limb of the tree where the fat scout carefully kept it while in camp. The light that flashed athwart the mahogany colored face of the young Crow told how pleased he was with this chance that was offered.

He immediately started to rummage through the various pockets of Waffles. Quite naturally the lesser bully objected to such liberties being taken

with his person; and it must have galled him more than a little to realize that it was an *Indian,* and a boy at that, who was subjecting him to such indignities; for like most men along the border, Waffles undoubtedly held Indians in contempt.

But when he raised his voice in stormy protest Thad told him to hush up; besides, the Fox leaned over and glared in his eyes with such a suggestive look that Waffles, being a coward at heart, gradually subsided, his protests taking the safer form of groans, and grunts, and wriggles, all of which were alike unavailing.

Presently the Crow uttered a cry of joy.

"Found what you were looking for?" asked Thad.

"Ugh! it is well!" and as he said this the Fox held something up.

Thad may have thought that the Indian boy was making a mountain out of a mole-hill, for if it had been left to him, he did not know that he would have willingly paid more than a dollar, at the most, for the object the Fox now gripped with such evident delight. But then, at the same time Thad realized that associations often have a great deal to do with the value of things. That peculiar strip of deerskin, decorated with colored beads that formed all sorts of designs, must have come down from some of the Fox's ancestors. Perhaps it was a species of wampum similar to that in use as currency

during the earlier days, when men like Daniel Boone were trying to settle along the Ohio River. And then again, it might be that the fore-fathers of the Fox always wore this strip of beaded leather when they were invested with the office of chief to the tribe.

At any rate, Waffles had apparently known of its value, and had stolen it, possibly hoping at some time to receive a rich reward for its safe return; for surely he could not have fancied it because he had any love for beauty, or meant to start a collection of Indian relics.

"Are you satisfied, Fox, now that you've recovered your property—if that is all he took from your home?" Thad asked.

"Huh! much like mark thief on him cheek, so know where belong!" grunted the Crow boy, longingly.

"Don't you let him!" almost shrieked the wretched Waffles, doubtless fearing that he was going to be tortured, as a penalty for his shortcomings. "Them Injuns jest like to mark a man all up, when they gits the chanct. Tell him to git off'n me! I ain't a goin' to stand fur it! If he so much as puts the p'int of his knife on me I'll vow to——"

"Keep still, you cowardly thief!" said Thad, sternly; and even Waffles seemed influenced by the hidden power in the scoutmaster's tone, for he broke

off in the middle of a sentence, and finished it by mumbling to himself.

Speaking to the Indian boy Thad went on:

"Run your hand over him again, and hand me any weapon you find. He's in a state where he might lose his head, and get us all into a fight, if we let him go armed."

Willingly the Crow boy did as he was told. The search revealed a big revolver that was apparently the mate of the one Thad had knocked from the hand of Kracker.

"Now get that other fellow's rifle, Allan," continued the patrol leader, who had mapped out his plan of campaign quickly.

He did not trust these men further than he could see them. They were quite unscrupulous; and after having been held up to scorn by this parcel of boys, there was every reason in the world to believe that they would plan a hasty revenge. And the fewer deadly weapons they had in their possession the better the chances would be for peace in that mountain valley.

The rifle in particular Thad wanted to hold back. With it, damage might be done at a much greater distance than with the smaller arms. And knowing that the boys had long distance modern rifles, possibly Kracker and his followers might keep out of range.

Besides, there was that business of Aleck's con-

cerning the hidden mine; they had promised to stand back of him until he had secured full possession; and that was apt to keep them in the neighborhood for some time, always subjected to annoyance from these anxious ones, who longed to secure the prize that had tantalized their species for so long.

So the rifle, and what ammunition Dickey Bird happened to be carrying in a belt slung over his shoulder, fell into the hands of the boys. They also retained possession of one of the heavy revolvers; not that any one fancied the clumsy weapon in the least; but as Thad said, "to cut the wings of the party as much as possible."

"Let Waffles get up, now, Fox," said Thad, when all these matters had been adjusted, much to the admiration of the other scouts, who thought their leader must be just "IT" when it came to doing things.

The shorter rascal was not slow to gain his feet. He was still boiling over with a sense of insult added to injury, and ready to vent his wrath in offensive words; but Thad cut all this short.

"Listen to me, Waffles," he said, sternly again; "We don't care to hear your opinion of anything. Take a lesson from the colonel here, who knows when silence is golden. You don't hear him swearing around, and threatening to break a blood-vessel in his mad feeling. He's taking it all as cool as a cucumber. He knows when it's a time to laugh,

and when it's a time to cry. Now, the sooner you gentlemen give us your room, the better we'll be pleased; and be sure to make it plenty of room, too; because we're all going to be ready to take snapshots at any of you we see, after half an hour has gone by."

Kracker moved his lips, but strange to say not a sound proceeded from them. The man was so completely overpowered by his emotions that for the time being he had actually lost all power of speech. For this Thad was pleased, because he believed that had the big prospector been able to say one half that was bubbling through his mind, they must have been treated to an awful exhibition of hard words.

So the three men turned their backs on their tormentors, and walked away; but it was certainly true that their retreat did not smack in the least of the jaunty and threatening manner of their late advance. They had, as Giraffe crowed jubilantly, "the wind taken from their sails, and just turned around, and went away."

"Wonder if we'll see anything more of 'em again?" remarked Bumpus, who had really carried himself quite handsomely through it all; though most of the time his eyes had seemed to be fairly bulging from his head, and he could be heard saying words over and over to himself to indicate surprise.

"I hope not," remarked Thad; "but it wouldn't surprise me if they bobbed up again later on. You

see, it's perhaps the biggest stake Kracker ever played for; and for years now this hidden mine has kept dancing before him, beckoning him on. He won't give it up easily, I'm afraid. There, look at him turn, and shake his fat fist at us! That shows how he feels about it. He'd just like to have us tied up right now, so he could lay on the whip, good and hard. But boys, after this, it's for us to keep a good lookout all the time. Such fellows as Kracker and the others wouldn't hesitate at anything, if only they saw a chance to win out."

And at his words Giraffe and his mates nodded their heads; but there was no loud demonstration; for somehow they seemed to realize the gravity of the game they were now playing, with the long lost mine as the stake.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SAFEST WAY OF "SHOOTING" A GRIZZLY.

MEANWHILE, how fared the ambitious big-horn hunters?

They had started out, filled with a determination to accomplish something, even if it took a couple of days. Indeed, the guide had said to Thad before leaving that none of them need worry if the party

failed to show up at nightfall. The distances were so great, and the mountain climbing of such a stupendous character, that they might have to put in the better part of several days reaching the feeding grounds of the animals, and getting the coveted chance for a shot or two.

When noon came it found them climbing steadily. They were entirely out of sight of the valley where the camp lay, so that they could have no knowledge of what was happening in that quarter. But so set were the boys on what had taken them forth, that for the time being they felt perfectly satisfied to quite forget other matters.

"Talk about your wild country," remarked Step Hen, when they all came to a little stop to eat a "snack," and rest, so as to be ready for a further climb; this sure takes the cake for me. Why, that poor little Blue Ridge country ain't in it. You could put it all in a pocket, here, and it wouldn't be missed."

"Well," remarked Smithy, who was bearing up under the strain in a manner that would have pleased the scoutmaster, could he have been along to notice it; "you want to be exceedingly careful how you say that before our hot-blooded Southern chum, Bob White, unless you're ready to get into a war of words."

"Oh! excuse me," chuckled Step Hen, "I wouldn't be guilty of hurting Bob's pride even a

little bit. I know he thinks that Land of the Sky country better than most other places. Well, it takes a lot of different people to make a world, don't it, fellers?"

"That's right, it does," remarked Davy Jones, who had managed to snap off several pictures as they came along; but was trying to save most of his exposures for things that would count, live subjects, in fact.

"How much further do we have to climb, Toby?" asked Smithy, trying to appear rather indifferent about it, though the others just knew he must feel the strain more than any of them; because Smithy had never been much of an athlete, and up to date had yet to play in his first baseball game, strange to say.

"Wall, that depends on a good many things," the guide responded. "Fust place, we don't know as yet jest whar the sheep might be feedin'. I'm headin' for a place whar I seen 'em more'n a few times, when I was prospectin' through this kentry."

"Oh! so *you* had a touch of the lost mine fever, too, did you?" quickly remarked Smithy; for up to the present time Toby had never so much as admitted this fact; but now he grinned and went on:

"Why, yes, I've taken my look, and had jest the same luck as all the rest what thought they could pick it up. But about them big horns, boys; if they

don't happen to be whar I'm headin' fust, then we got to go another two hours. But chances are, we'll find a flock in one of them places, an' git a shot afore nightfall sets in."

With this comforting thought, then, the little party once more started out, after an hour's rest and refreshment. Smithy was doubtless feeling considerably better. He never complained, even while he limped sadly at times; and once came near losing his grip, when swinging across a bad place in the trail; so that he might even have fallen, only that the ready guide threw an arm around him, having been keeping conveniently near.

Smithy was proving one thing, at least; he might never turn out to be much of a hunter; but he surely possessed his father's spirit, when it came to game qualities. And when he went back home, all the maiden aunts in creation would never be able to bring that boy back again to the docile habits that had marked him heretofore, thanks to woman training. Smithy had had a taste of real outdoors, and would never be satisfied again to live in that old " sissy " rut.

It was about an hour after the stop that, without warning, the little party suddenly came upon a monstrous grizzly bear, slowly making his way diagonally across the track they were following.

At sight of them the animal reared up on his hind quarters, and seemed to be trying to make up

his mind whether he ought to attack these queer two-legged creatures, or go on about his own business.

Step Hen half raised his gun to his shoulder; but instantly the guide clapped a hand over the lock. There were no convenient trees in which they could take shelter from an enraged grizzly; and Toby Smathers knew too much about these animals to have any wish to find one rushing at them, wild with rage from a wound.

"Snap—click!"

"Got him that time!" said a delighted voice.

Of course it was Davy Jones. He had swung that kodak of his around, calmly focussed on the grizzly as the animal reared himself up to a terrible height, and then pressed the button.

And perhaps after all that was the safest kind of "shooting," when it came to a matter of grizzly bears. Even one of this ferocious species would hardly offer any serious objections to having his likeness preserved, for future generations to gaze upon.

"Keep still, all on you!" warned the guide, who was holding his own rifle in readiness for instant use, should the bear conclude to charge them. "We ain't lost any Mountain Charleys to-day, as I knows on. Big horns is what we kim out after. Let him take hisself off, if he will, and a good riddance too, I says."

Which the enormous beast finally concluded to do. Perhaps he had had his dinner, and was not feeling in a particularly aggressive mood. No matter what the cause, all of the boys heaved sighs of positive relief when he shuffled away, looking back over his shoulder several times.

Just like he wanted half an excuse for getting his mad up," explained Step Hen. "He had a chip on his shoulder, all right. And I guess I'm glad you didn't let me start in on him, Toby. I might a missed knockin' him over for keeps; and then what a nice pickle we'd all been in. Excuse me from tacklin' a moving mountain like that, when trees are as scarce as hens' teeth."

"And I'm real glad, too, you didn't fire," admitted Smithy, who had turned somewhat white during the minute of dreadful suspense, while he stared at that monster squatted in their path. "I was ready to back you up; but then what could you expect from a greenhorn? I never wished so much that I'd taken to this sort of thing before, as I did when that fearful beast was looking at me, just as if to say, 'you're the tenderest of the lot, Smithy, and I think I'll choose you, if I have room for any more inside me.'"

The other boys laughed at his words; but on the whole they thought Smithy had carried himself rather creditably, all things considered. And each knew, deep down in his secret soul, that his own

heart had seemed to stand still; while his blood ran cold, as he stood there, awaiting the decision of the bear.

They glanced around rather fearfully for some little time after that; but as nothing was seen again of the mountain terror, they finally concluded that the incident was closed.

Again their thoughts went out toward the singular game they had come after. Many an ambitious hunter had sought to shoot a big-horn sheep in the Rockies, day after day, and was compelled to give it up in the end as useless, so Toby had informed them. The conditions were generally very difficult, and the game so shy. Besides, their sense of impending danger seemed to be abnormally developed; and on account of the rocky formation of the slopes where they found bunches of grass in the crevices, it was often next to impossible to stalk them from leeward.

This being the case the tired boys were thrilled to the core when Toby finally announced that he had had a glimpse of the game. Of course they became wildly excited, and demanded that he show them. Creeping carefully up to a certain outcropping rock, they peered around its edge. And for the first time in their lives Davy, Step Hen and Smithy found themselves looking upon the queer animals that seem to live in the wildest parts of the Rockies, taking delight in bounding from crag

to crag, and baffling the skill of the most experienced chamois hunters to get within gun-shot of their lofty eyries.

There were seven or eight of the sheep, and as they were really just within gun range the boys could get a splendid view of them. They admired the tremendous curved horns greatly, and Step Hen quivered with eagerness to say that he had shot a Rocky Mountain sheep all by himself; while Davy clicked his camera several times, so that he at least might have a picture, in case they could get no nearer.

"I can't be sure of even hitting one from here," whispered Step Hen, turning appealingly to the guide. "Ain't it possible to creep up closer, Toby? Oh! please fix it for us, won't you?" just as though the guide had it in his power to do anything they wanted.

But fortunately the lay of the mountain allowed Toby to arrange it; and he soon mapped out a route that they might crawl along, keeping well hidden from the feeding sheep, and getting gradually closer.

Besides, it happened that luck was working overtime in their favor; because the animals happened to be feeding toward them. Now only two or three could be seen, nibbling at the tufts of grass, or leaping across some small fissure that tried to block them from other tempting pastures; and then again

the whole seven would be in sight at the same moment.

After advancing slowly and carefully for some time Toby made motions that they dare not go any further. He also let them know by signs that, as the sheep were still coming in a line toward them, all they had to do was to lie quiet, and wait until the right moment.

That was a period of great excitement to the scouts, two of them clutching their guns in hands that would tremble in spite of them; while the third was trying to find the best spot to hold his kodak, with a view of snapping off a picture just before the critical second came for shooting.

Step Hen and Smithy had even gone so far as to select which of the seven sheep they hoped to get; and as they lay there, peeping out from their rocky shelter, it can be taken for granted that each of them had eyes for his particular quarry only.

And then finally Toby touched the shoulder of the kodak owner, as a signal that he had better be getting to work.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SHEEP HUNTERS.

Davy Jones had made all his arrangements. He had only to press the button, when the slight "click" told that his picture was an accomplished fact, and that if the hunters did as well, the expedition might be set down as a glorious success.

Davy had carried his shotgun fastened to his back with a strap, while he worked his little camera. Now he reached out for the gun, although realizing the folly of trying to do any execution at that distance with buckshot cartridges.

"Now!" said the guide, suddenly.

It would seem as though he spoke aloud purposely, knowing what the effect was apt to be. Every feeding big-horn raised its head instantly, and for the space of several seconds stood there as though carved out of stone.

A better chance for a shot could not be imagined.

"Bang!"

"Whang!"

That was Smithy firing first, and the second report told that Step Hen's little thirty-thirty was on the job instantly.

One big-horn sheep fell over on the rock, and

kicked several times. It might have fallen over the ledge only that somehow the body seemed to become fast in a crotch; and there it lay in a tantalizing position, for only by a most difficult climb downward could it be reached at all.

"Oh! I hit mine, and he's fallen down there!" cried Smithy in a voice that just thrilled with wild exultation; and hardly had he said this than he added, in a deeply crushed tone: "Oh! wasn't that too cruel of him now, to just bound off on his horns like they were skies, and get on his feet again? There he goes now, and see him limp, will you, fellows? I hit him, yes, I surely did!"

"Well, he's gone, and that's the last you're likely to see of him, more's the pity," said Step Hen; "but look at *my* game, would you, stuck there in among them rocks? Toby, we must manage to get him, some way or other. Tell me how it can be done, won't you?"

The guide scratched his head, as if himself a bit puzzled.

"Only one way I kin see, boys," he observed, "and that means a lot more climbing for us."

"You mean we'll just have to work around, and get up there above the place where *my* big-horn lies, as dead as a door nail; is that it, Toby?" questioned Step Hen, perhaps unconsciously placing great emphasis on that pronoun; nor could he be blamed for feeling proud, if half that the guide had told

them concerning the difficulties encountered by hunters of Rocky Mountain sheep were true.

"Just what I had in mind," replied Toby.

"Then let's make a start," urged Step Hen. "My stars! I wouldn't like to lose that splendid fellow for anything. Just think of having that pair of horns to put in our club room at home, Davy. I hope you got a good picture, too; because we c'n have an enlargement taken, and hang it under *my* horns."

"I don't see any growing out of your head, yet, Step Hen," chuckled Davy, as he and the third scout fell in behind the others, and started forth.

One thing made it a little easier now; they did not have to be so particular about moving softly, since their aim had been accomplished, and they had shot their bolt.

But the way was rough enough at the best. Smithy had a hard time of it. He was forever bruising his hands, for they were not so tough in the palms as those of the other boys, who had been accustomed to work and hard play. Besides, often he took a little slide and in this fashion tore his trousers as well as made quite a gash in his leg. But the other boys rather fancied that Smithy, unable to wholly overcome his former love for fine clothes, grieved more on account of that big rent in his khaki trousers, than he did for the bleeding leg, though it must have pained him considerably.

Still, he did not murmur; Smithy was showing much more grit than either of the others had ever dreamed he possessed. Like Bumpus, it only seemed to need a fitting opportunity to come to the surface; as is the case with many backward boys.

As they turned an angle of the rocks, Step Hen gave a shout.

"What's this? What's this?" he called.

"Oh! please don't shoot!" shrilled Smithy, wonderfully excited again; "It must be the sheep I struck with my bullet; see how the poor thing drags that leg after him? Let me have the pleasure of knocking him over, and putting him out of pain?"

"Get busy then, or he'll give you the slip after all. Quick, Smithy, or I'll be tempted to shoot him myself. Whoop! you did it that time, Smithy! Good boy!" and Step Hen fairly danced in his excitement.

Smithy had made good. How he did it, he never could tell; but somehow, when he just pointed his gun in a general way toward the escaping big-horn, and pulled the trigger, why, the already badly wounded animal fell over, gave a couple of last kicks, and then lay still.

But strange to say, Smithy was less given to excitement over his exploit than either of the other boys. As they all bent over the big-horn to admire his sturdy frame, and the head ornaments that dis-

tinguish him among all his kind, Smithy was seen to stroke the hairy back of the dead sheep, and clinch his teeth hard together, as though after all he felt half sorry that a sudden whim had caused him to actually take a life that nothing could restore. Evidently it would be some time before Smithy could so far overcome his former gentle traits of character to feel the hunter's fierce lust for his quarry.

"But this ain't getting *my* big-horn, you know," remarked Step Hen, as though the feel of those massive curved head-pieces had thrown him into a new fever of impatience to secure his own trophies; for it would be a shame if the greenhorn of the party should be the only one to exhibit positive evidences of their having shot game.

"Come along then, and we'll soon git around to whar p'raps ye might climb down, if so be ye're keerful not to slip," and the guide once more started off.

"Oh! do we abandon my big-horn, then?" cried Smithy, as though half tempted to refuse to leave the spot on what might prove to be a wild-goose chase; to him it seemed like leaving the substance to try and catch the shadow.

"We kin come back this way, and take keer of it then," said Toby; and with this assurance Smithy had to rest content.

After some further scrambling along the face of

the steep slope, digging their toes into the shale that often crumbled under them, when they might risk a serious ride down the side of the mountain only for the fact that they managed to cling fast with their hands, they reached a point where it was extra rocky, and a pretty sheer descent.

"Down thar your sheep lies," the guide said, pointing as he spoke.

Step Hen immediately laid his gun aside, and crawling to the edge he looked over.

"I don't see hide or hair of it, though, Toby?" he complained.

"No more you kin," returned the other, with decision marked in both voice and manner; "but all the same it's down thar, not more'n a hundred feet at most. I got my bearin's fine. Look off yonder, and ye'll see whar we lay when ye did the shootin' at the big horns."

"He's right, Step Hen," said Davy Jones, after looking to where the guide was pointing so confidently. "I'd know that rock among a thousand. I'll never forget it, either. And yes, your sheep must be lying below us right now."

"I think the same, fellows," asserted Smithy, who was beginning to feel that he ought to give his opinion of things after this, since he was now an actual *boni fide* hunter, and had even secured one of the most wary of all wild animals in the whole West.

"But why don't I see it, then?" demanded Step Hen, always very stubborn, and needing to be shown.

"Ye see," the guide explained, "the face of the mountain backs in some, in a general way. That tells the story. The only thing that bothers me is, if I had ought to let ye try and get down thar, so's to shove the sheep off, and land it at the bottom; or make the riffle myself."

"Oh! I wouldn't think of letting you try it," declared Step Hen, quickly. "I'm young and spry, and used to climbing up cliffs and such stunts, besides," he added as a clincher, "it's *my* big horn, you know."

Had either of the other boys backed him up, the chances were that Toby Smathers might have refused to give his permission; for he knew that there would naturally be considerable risk involved in such an undertaking; but then both Davy and his comrade, Smithy, saw nothing so very unusal in the proceeding, the one because he was not accustomed to judging such things; and Davy on account of being such a clever gymnast himself, always doing dangerous tricks, such as hanging from a high limb of a tree by his toes, coming down the outside of a tree by using the branches as a descending ladder, and all such "crazy antics," as Giraffe called them.

"Here, somebody hold my gun," said Step Hen, with an air of resolution.

"You're going to be some keerful, I take it?" questioned the guide, dubiously.

"Course I am; what d'ye take me for, Toby? Think I want to go to my own funeral in a hurry? Not much. Oh! I c'n be careful, all right. Don't you worry about me. And I want that big-horn worse than ever, I do. Here goes, then."

He started down the face of the almost perpendicular precipice. There were plenty of places where he could get a good foothold, and secure a grip with his ready hands. The only danger seemed to be, as the guide had warned him, in having some apparently secure rock suddenly give way under his weight. He must watch out for that constantly, and never take a fresh step unless he was sure he could maintain his hold upon the last knob of rock.

"Call out if we can help any, Step Hen," was what Davy said, as they saw the last of their companion's head just about to vanish, where the first inward dip to the precipice occurred.

"Sure I will, and just you remember our signal code, Davy. I may have to use it if I get caught tight in a crack, and can't break away nohow. Good-bye, be good to yourselves, now, and don't go to believin' that there's any chance of me losing my grip."

Then he vanished from their sight. A dreadful clatter of falling stones gave the two scouts still above a case of the "trembles" immediately afterwards, and Davy called at the top of his voice:

"I say, Step Hen!"

"All right;" welled up from somewhere below them; "did that on purpose to test a stepping place. Ketch a weasel asleep, before you get me to stand on a loose place, why, it's as easy as fallin' off a log, this is."

CHAPTER XV.

A FIERCE FIGHT WITH EAGLES.

But although Step Hen spoke so flippantly, he was far from being as confident as he pretended. In fact, as he proceeded downward, he found his task getting more and more difficult.

One thing that bothered him was the getting up again. He just felt sure that he would not be able to accomplish it; but then, if it came to the worst, doubtless the balance of the descent was no harder to manage than this; and after first sending his big-horn down, he might pick his own way after it, and the others could follow as best they saw fit.

Step Hen was a self-reliant boy, at any rate;

sometimes the scoutmaster feared too much so. And since he had said he was going to get that game, and was already part way down the face of the rocky wall, there was nothing to be done but keep right along, which he proceeded to do.

He could not get the slightest glimpse of his comrades. They were somewhere up above him; but just as the guide had declared, the face of the wall fell away in places, and this kept taking him further beyond their range of vision constantly.

Whenever he could do so without imperiling his support, Step Hen would crook his neck, and look downward, in the hope of seeing where the sheep lay. He could not help thinking how much easier this effort would come for him, if a kindly Nature had given him the extensive neck that Giraffe possessed.

"There it is!" he exclaimed, joyfully, as his anxious eyes fell upon an object just a short distance below, and which he knew must be the crumpled body of his big-horn. "And I ought to get there now without breaking my neck. Wow! that was a near tumble, all right! Careful, boy, careful now! Them horns of yours ain't growed big enough to drop on, like the sheep do."

He halted for a full minute, not that he was so tired in the arms, but to recover from the shock received when he came so near falling. Then once more resuming his labor, he presently had the satis-

faction of dropping beside the motionless body of his victim.

"Bigger horns than Smithy's had!" was his first exclamation, as he bent over, the better to see; and at the same moment he became conscious of the fact that some buzzards, or some other big birds, were swooping around close by, making him think they had looked on his dead sheep as their next dinner.

"Guess p'raps I'd better be tossing it over here, and letting it roll down to the bottom; then I c'n foller the best way there is, and——"

Something gave him a sudden fierce blow that knocked Step Hen down on his hands and knees; and he might have rolled over the edge of the narrow shelf, only for his good luck in catching hold of the sheep's rounded horns.

"Quit that, you silly! you nearly knocked me over that time!" he shouted angrily; his very first thought being that one of the other boys, presumably Davy Jones, because he was so smart about climbing everywhere, had followed after him, and was thus rudely announcing his arrival close on the heels of the first explorer.

But as Step Hen raised his head to look, to his surprise he failed to see any one near him. A dreadful suspicion that Davy might have pitched over the edge of the narrow shelf, after striking him, assailed the scout; and he was almost on the

point of looking, when suddenly there was a rush of great wings, and he dropped flat on his face just in time to avoid being struck a second time.

"Whew! eagles, and mad as hops at me for comin' here!" gasped Step Hen, as, raising his head cautiously, like a turtle peeping out of its shell, he caught sight of two wheeling birds that came and went with tremendous speed.

He noted the spread of their immense wings, and it seemed to Step Hen as if in all his experience he had never before gazed upon more powerful birds than those two Rocky Mountain eagles.

Perhaps they had a nest near by, with young eaglets in it, and fancied that he was bent on robbing them. Then again, the big birds may have decided that they could make good use of the fine quarry that had lodged in the rocks so conveniently near their nest; and resented the coming of another claimant.

But no matter what the contributing cause might be, they were undoubtedly as "mad as a wet hen," as Step Hen afterwards declared, in telling of his adventure there on that shelf of rock, fully a hundred feet from the top and the bottom, on the steep face of the mountain.

His first thought was how he could fight back, for he saw that he was to be at the mercy of the great birds that swooped down again and again, striking viciously at him with claws, beaks and

powerful wings, until the boy was bleeding in half a dozen different places.

In casting his eyes about, even as he fought with his bare hands, and shouted for assistance at the top of his voice, Step Hen made a little discovery. A tree must have grown up above at one time or other, for there, stuck fast in a crevice of the rock he saw a pretty good-sized remnant of a branch that he believed would make a fair cudgel, better than his bare hands at any rate, with which to strike at the attacking eagles.

When he had clutched this in his eager hand the boy felt more confidence; and watching his opportunity he did manage to meet the swoop of the next bird with a whack that sent it whirling back. But they quickly learned to adopt other tactics, now that he was armed, both of them coming together from opposite directions; so that unable to dodge, or hit back properly Step Hen again found himself getting the worst of the fight.

Would his companions be able to do anything for him; or was he to be left there on that shelf of rock, to either conquer his savage enemies, alone and unaided, or succumb to their ferocious assaults?

All the while he was beating at them with might and main Step Hen kept up a constant shouting. He had a double purpose in this,—hoping to tempt one of his companions to descend to his rescue, carrying a gun, since they seemed unable to hit the

birds from above, though several shots had been fired; and then again it was possible that the sound of a human voice would by degrees cause the eagles to haul off.

"Take that, will you!" the boy cried, whenever he succeeded in reaching either of his feathered assailants with his club. "Come at me again, will you? Just wait, and see what happens to you yet! Ouch! that hurt some, now! Oh! if I could only swing this club around better, without bein' afraid of tumbling over, wouldn't I knock their heads off, —wow! once more you'll have it, will you? See the feathers fly! I b'lieve they're weakenin' some, sure I do; but what about me? I'll bleed to death yet, if they keep on tapping me like that."

So Step Hen went on, shouting and whacking away, doing the best he was able under the circumstances. Nobody could ever say at any rate, but what he put up a strapping good fight of it, he kept thinking; but all the same he cast an anxious eye upward whenever he could find a chance, hoping to see a pair of human legs heave in sight, and discover the welcome face of either Davy Jones or the guide.

"Bring a gun! Bring a gun!"

That was about the burden of his shouts. He hoped those above understood what he was saying. The eagles seldom went far outside a given circle, so that they could only be glimpsed from above

occasionally; and it was like shooting at a disappearing target in the gallery, to try and hit them under such circumstances.

Step Hen had knocked one of the great birds down for the sixth time, and was dismayed to see that he had not even then disabled it, since it immediately started to fly again, no wing having been broken by his club; when he thought he caught the sound of a human voice close by.

Then some loose stones rattled down beside him, giving him a thrill of joy; for he knew now reinforcements were on the way, and it nerved him to fight on.

Another minute, and some one dropped down beside the crouching Step Hen, who was breathing hard from his exertions, but still full of pluck, as a true scout should always be.

"Toby!" he called out, in a quavering voice, and looking very grim, with his face so scratched, and streaked with blood; "I'm sure glad to see you; but gladder to notice that you've got your gun! Look out! there they come again! Dodge, Toby, dodge; they're on to you!"

But the guide had snatched his gun from about his back, where it had been securely fastened with a stout cord. He had no time to aim or fire just then, only to swing the barrel around, and strike viciously at the swooping bird, that threw its claws

forward as it pounced upon him, just as a fish-hawk might do on striking the water.

The attack was quickly parried, and now Toby also had a streak of blood on his cheek, where one of those furious wings had struck him.

Now he turned the gun quickly around in his hands.

"Leave one for me, Toby!" pleaded the boy, eagerly. "I ought to have the pleasure of knocking over one of 'em, after what they have done to me. Oh! you put it to that gay old robber of honest fish-hawks, sure you did! And he's gone down below-decks for good. Give me your gun, Toby; I *must* have it, I tell you!"

And the guide, understanding, as well as sympathizing with, the spirit that caused the other to cry out in this fashion, did thrust his repeating rifle into the hands of Step Hen, after throwing the discharged shell out, and sending a fresh one into the firing chamber.

With a satisfaction that words could never paint, Step Hen followed the swinging form of the remaining eagle as it flew around so as to get in line for another swoop. And just as the great bird started to come down at them, the boy pulled the trigger.

His aim was true, and the second eagle pitched forward, whirling over and over as it went tum-

bling down the face of the descent, just as its mate had done.

"Hurrah!" shouted Step Hen, tremendously pleased with the final outcome of the fight with the pair of fierce pirates of the upper air currents; "that's what they get for tackling me, ain't it, Toby? We gave 'em what they needed, didn't we? But say, I'm just thinkin' that it's going to be a tough old job for me to get back up where the boys are; and that p'raps we'll have to keep on climbin' down, after shoving the big-horn off the shelf."

And the guide, after recovering his breath, which had been used up in his recent hasty movements in coming to the rescue, looking over the edge, admitted that he believed such a course was the only one left to them.

CHAPTER XVI.

DOWN THE SLOPE.

"The first thing, then, is to toss this feller overboard," remarked Step Hen, as he proudly touched the dead big-horn with the toe of his shoe, and tried to assume the air of a conquering hero; but his face was so sore, and his appearance so remarkable, that apparently his manner did not impress the guide very much.

"The sooner you get to water, and wash them scratches, the better," said Toby. "I've knowed more'n one feller have a bad time from gettin' clawed by eagles; and the doctor said as how 'twar blood poisonin'-like. But seems to me most of that might a kim from you bein' hit by their wings."

"Just what it did," replied Step Hen, though he looked a bit anxious. "And goodness gracious! how they could hit with 'em, though. Felt like you'd run against an electric fan, or something like that. Busted the skin every time too, and made the blood come. But never mind about that, Toby; shall I shove this thing over now?"

"Just as you say," replied the guide; "we'll be apt to find it when we get down; which I hope we can do and be safe, and sound in limb."

Apparently Toby was a little anxious himself about the result of the next step on the programme. The scout accordingly worked the dead sheep loose, and cast it over the edge. He watched it go bounding down with considerable apprehension that the other did not comprehend, until he heard Step Hen remark in a relieved tone:

"Didn't break either horn; that's all hunky dory!"

"Don't you think we ort to let the rest know what we're expectin' to do?" suggested the guide just then.

"Why, that's a good idea, Toby," replied Step

Hen. "And while we can't see our chums, there's a way of communicatin' with 'em. Anyhow, I c'n tell 'em to send down a piece of string, and pull up a message I'll write. Davy Jones knows the code enough for that."

He began making a series of queer sounds, that at first considerably amused the old guide; but when an answer came from far above, Toby realized that there did promise to be more merit in the signal code of the scouts.

Then a little later Step Hen exclaimed triumphantly:

"Here comes the end of the string, Toby, with a stone tied to it. If they can swing it in now, we'll be able to fasten this message I've written to the end of it, and send it up. Then the boys will know what we expect to do; and they'll try and get down some other way, to join us before night comes on. Because it'd be kind of tough if we couldn't bunk together through the night."

After some manipulation with the piece of broken branch they succeeded in getting hold of the dangling cord, which Smithy had carried along with him, because of some reason or other, possibly from the same principle that caused Bumpus to carry that rope around wherever he went, thinking that it might come in handy sometime or other.

Having dispatched the note to the other scouts

by means of the cord channel, Step Hen and the guide started to descend from their perch.

The way was anything but easy, especially to the boy. He had been weakened more than he realized by his hard struggle with those two fierce eagles. And perhaps his numerous wounds, slight as they seemed on the surface, made him less capable of keeping such a firm grip as he had before reaching the ledge. But the same old indomitable pluck held good. When a drop of perspiration, mingled with blood from those scratches, dimmed his vision, Step Hen would dash one hand impatiently across his eyes, and then go right on clambering downward.

Toby kept as near the boy as he could. Had he possessed a rope he would certainly have fastened himself to Step Hen, as a means of protecting the lad against an ugly fall; just as the glacier climbers do when ascending to the snow-covered summit of some lofty mountain peak; so that should one slip, another, having a firm hold at the time, could bear him up.

Again and again he cautioned his companion against trusting his weight on some inviting projecting knob of stone, which he himself had tried, and found wanting; for the guide had insisted on going first as a sort of pilot; when his real object was to be in position to clutch hold of the boy, if possible, should Step Hen make a bad move and fall.

But they finally managed to reach the bottom without any accident happening, for which both of them were thankful enough. They threw themselves upon the rocks, utterly exhausted, and panting for breath. Step Hen was indeed very near a complete collapse; for the boy had been under a terrible strain recently, both mentally and bodily.

After a little, however, when he had pumped much good air into his system, and regained some of his lost breath, Step Hen remembered.

"I hadn't ought to be lyin' around this way, when those fellers up yonder are all tied up in knots waitin' to know whether we've made the riffle, or got stuck part way down. So here goes to tell 'em. They know from my note what we want 'em to try and do next."

So he started in again with those queer sounds that seemed to climb up the face of the cliff as though on ladders that were invisible. And there came back similar sounds, which Step Hen listened to with eagerness, finally crying out:

"They understand that we're safe down here; and Davy says as how he thinks he knows a way to work around. And now, since we've got some time on our hands, Toby, let's look about for a place to spend the night."

But Toby had not forgotten something that he had spoken of before.

"As for the camp, I'll take keer of that," he said;

"while you drop down aside this leetle crick here, and wash your face and hands. The sooner ye git them 'ere scratches clean, the better, I reckon. Heaps of trouble kin grow out of a little keerlessness in that regard."

"I guess you're right," replied Step Hen, trying to make a grimace, but without much success, because the blood had dried on his face, and made it feel as stiff as though it had been duly starched on a washday at home.

So he complied with the ruling of the guide; and while the cool water made his cuts smart more or less, to begin with, still there was a sense of satisfaction in the cleanly feeling that soon followed.

When he got back to the side of the guide again Step Hen discovered that Toby had found the place he was looking for, close to where the big-horn lay. Already smoke was beginning to rise, showing that Giraffe might not be the only one in the party who knew just how to go about making a cooking fire.

The scout watched Toby with considerable interest. He learned that when a man has lived all his life in the borderland, he has picked up a good many useful little wrinkles that a wideawake scout ought to know; and Step Hen determined to profit by his experience in the company of Toby Smathers.

Besides, now that all the excitement was over, Step Hen secretly confessed to feeling more or less

tired; though had any of his mates been around, he would doubtless have scorned to display this fact. It was nice to just stretch out by the cheery blaze, and see some one else quite willing to do the work.

The guide was only too glad to assume all the burden of getting supper, such as it promised to be. Secretly he was proud of Step Hen. He had started in with rather a poor opinion of the boy's qualities, and thought him given somewhat to boasting, and practical jokes. But he had found that he was full of grit, gave promise of being a good hunter, and was ready to attempt any sort of task, it mattered not how difficult.

The way Step Hen fought those two eagles, alone and unaided, on that narrow ledge, had aroused the ardent admiration of Toby. While he worked, he cast many a secret glance toward where Step Hen was stretched out; and each time the guide would give a little satisfied nod, and a chuckle, just as though he were passing a critical judgment, and saying to himself:

"All wool, and a yard wide; he'll do, I sure reckons. He's got the real stuff in him, anybody with one eye kin see. And I'm sure goin' to tell Mr. Scout Master that same, too. He deserves to be put up a few notches arter this."

Could Step Hen but have read what was passing through Toby's mind just then, he would have

thrilled with deepest satisfaction. Why, the laurel wreath of the victor could not have given him one half the solid pleasure that would come could he but know he had won the admiration of this experienced forest ranger, and trapper-guide.

Meanwhile, after he had the cooking fire under full way, Toby proceeded to skin the Rocky mountain sheep, making sure to handle the excellent horns carefully, as Step Hen begged, since they were almost perfect.

"He ain't a youngster, and at the same time he don't seem to be so *very* old," the guide remarked, as he worked, cutting up the sheep; so, p'raps we kin get our teeth workin' on him some. I never was much of a hand for this sorter meat; but in such a pinch as this I kin eat even mutton. Anyhow, it'll sure keep us from goin' hungry, and that's the game right now. I hopes as how the other boys kin get here afore dark sets in."

"That makes me remember I'm neglecting my duty; because I ought to be lettin' out a whoop now and then, just to sort of guide Davy and Smithers."

With that Step Hen managed to get to his feet, though he was surprised to find how stiff he had become, just sitting there. Toby grinned to see him wince, as he stretched first one arm, and then a leg. He knew what it meant. The strain of the recent engagement on the ledge, besides all that

hanging desperately to the face of the precipice, was telling on the boy's muscles.

When Step Hen let out a loud cry, he was pleased to get a response in the well-known voice of Davy Jones. The call came from a point not far away, and Toby immediately declared that the other scouts must be about half-way down.

"They're agoin' to make it, all right, I do believe!" Step Hen exclaimed.

"Looks that way, for a fact," the guide responded.

The day was almost done, at least down at the foot of that great wall that stretched upward for hundreds of feet. Lying there, resting the back of his head on both hands, and looking upward to where some buzzards were wheeling against the sky, Step Hen could hardly believe that he had actually descended all that distance in safety. He shuddered as he contemplated what an ugly tumble he must have experienced, if those fighting eagles had succeeded in knocking him off the ledge.

And just as the shades of approaching night began to gather around them, with a rather appetizing odor from cooking meat filling the immediate neighborhood, there came a hail from a point close at hand.

"Hello! there, glad to see you're able to sit up, and take notice, after all the row you kicked up. First thing Smithy and me want to know is, what

under the sun was it all about?" and with these words the two scouts staggered into camp, throwing themselves wearily down beside their chum.

CHAPTER XVII.

TROUBLES THICKEN FOR YOUNG ALECK.

THE scouts were pretty hungry, and they united in pronouncing the supper "just prime." But then the conditions would not allow of any other verdict; and as Toby regretfully declared, they all had good teeth, while his were getting "frayed and worn."

But after a period of stress and storm, a haven does seem good indeed; and sitting there, chatting, alongside that blaze, which had now been built up into a real camp-fire, the three boys were feeling a thousand per cent better than they had a couple of hours before.

Of course Step Hen had told all about his great combat with the two fighting eagles. He even led the doubting Davy along the foot of the descent, with a blazing torch in his hand, until they had found both of the dead birds, which they lugged back to camp with them, to show to the wondering Smithy as positive evidence of the truth of the story.

And after that the boys would surely feel more respect for Step Hen's prowess as a hunter, and the possessor of unlimited nerve.

Smithy declared that nothing on earth could tempt him to try and descend that precipice where Step Hen had done it; and was amazed when Davy announced that they had accomplished a feat very nearly as hazardous; only, coming a yard at a time, they had not noticed the danger.

"I only hope nothing will run off with my sheep," Smithy had remarked, plaintively, at one time, after they had finished their meal, and were just lounging around, taking things easy.

"How about that, Toby?" asked Davy Jones; "will wolves be apt to rob Smithy of his hard-earned laurels?"

"Don't know anything about that ere," grinned the guide; "but if so be you mean will they come around, and eat his mutton, I'm afraid that's jest what'll happen. But," he added, as Smithy gave a plaintive little bleat, "they cain't eat them big horns, you know; and I reckons as how that's the main thing you wants, ain't it?"

"Oh! yes, if that is so, I shall stop worrying. But I surely do want to carry that souvenir back with me; because, you know that is my first game," Smithy went on to say.

"Wall," remarked the guide, with a nod, "you had ought to be proud of 'em; 'cause they ain't

many fellers as kin say the fust wild game they ever knocked down was a big-horn. I've knowed old hunters as couldn't ever git one, try as hard as they might. We had a heap of luck to-day, let me tell you, boys, a heap of it. And for mutton, 'twan't so *very* tough, either."

"Oh! I thought I heard some one give a funny little cough just then!" exclaimed Step Hen, suddenly sitting up straight.

"You was correct at that," said the guide, quietly drawing his rifle closer to him, as though caution were second nature. "There is some parties accomin' down the canyon here, and headin' for our fire."

"The boys, mebbe!" exclaimed Davy Jones.

"No, I don't think they be," Toby Smathers added, straining his eyes to catch the first glimpse of the newcomers; for in this wild region, strangers are not to be always recognized as friends until they have proven themselves such.

"There's two of 'em," remarked Step Hen, "and they're men, I c'n see."

"Hello! there, don't shoot, we're friends, all right!" called a voice, so peculiar in itself that Toby immediately laughed aloud, as though he had no difficulty in recognizing it.

"Is that Sheriff Bob McNulty?" he asked.

"Nobody else," came the reply; "and unless I'm mighty far off my base, that must be my old friend, Toby Smathers, the forest ranger."

The two men came on to the fire. The boys saw that the one whom Toby had called Sheriff Bob was a tall, angular man, wearing the regulation wide-brimmed soft hat, and long black coat that sheriffs out in the Wild and Woolly West seem to so frequently think a badge of their calling.

He impressed them as a man of sterling character; but they did not entertain the same sort of an opinion toward his companion, who was a middle-aged man, lanky and sinister in appearance, and with a crafty gleam in his shifting eyes that somehow gave Step Hep and Davy Jones a cold feeling of distrust.

"Why, what's this mean, Toby; you a forest ranger camping with a parcel of kids?" exclaimed the sheriff, throwing a quick, interrogative glance toward his companion, which the other answered with a negative shake of the head, after giving each of the three boys a keen look, while a shade of bitter disappointment crossed his crafty face.

"Oh! it was an off season for me, Sheriff Bob," replied the guide, laughing; "an' I thought I'd try playing guide again, this time to a bunch of Boy Scouts what come out to the Rockies from the Far East, to hunt big game."

The sheriff grinned broadly, as though that struck him a good deal in the nature of a joke.

"Boy Scouts, eh?" he continued, as he calmly sat him down by the fire; "well, I've heard a heap

about them, but these are the first I've set eyes on. They brought their nerve along with 'em I reckon, Toby?" and he chuckled again while speaking.

"That's the way I thought about 'em fust pop, Sheriff Bob," remarked Toby, in a quiet, convincing tone; "but I've found out that I sized 'em up a lot too low. They's eight of 'em in the bunch, and the rest is keepin' camp down by that willow that stands by the spring hole in the valley. We came out to-day to try and get a big-horn."

The sheriff sniffed the air at this.

"Say, you don't mean to tell me they shot a sheep?" he demanded.

"Two of the same, and at a pretty fair distance too. We got 'em both. This here, who is known as Smithy, had never killed anything bigger'n a mouse afore, I understands, an' precious few of 'em; while Step Hen here, he's had considerable experience up in Maine, which is said to be a good hunting ground."

The sheriff pursed up his lips, and arched his eyebrows.

"Well," he remarked, "I'd like to shake hands with you both, boys, because you've done what I never yet accomplished in my life—shot a big-horn."

"But sho! that ain't near all," declared the proud Toby; "they got a couple of big grizzlies in the bargain; and right this very day Step Hen, he

clumb half way down that cliff thar, to shove his sheep loose; and had to fight for his life agin a pair o' cantankerous eagles what had a nest up thar. I went to his help, an' thar the birds lie, Sheriff Bob!"

The officer whistled again.

"This *is* a surprise, I must say," he remarked. "But Toby, if so be you could spare us a mouthful of that same mutton, why, we'd be obliged. We've got to be going in a little while, because, you see, I'm up here to assist this gentleman, who's name is Mr. Artemus Rawson, and a lawyer from Denver, look up a boy who's his nephew, and who's stolen something his uncle values a heap. We learned he was last seen on the hike for this country roundabout; and I'm bound to find him, by hook or by crook. I always do, you remember, Toby; none of them ever gets away from Sheriff Bob."

Step Hen almost cried out, such was the thrill that shot through him. Almost instinctively his eyes sough those of Davy Jones, and a look of intelligence passed between them.

Rawson, the sheriff said his name was, and he was a lawyer from Denver, looking for a boy who was his nephew, and whose name therefore was likely to be the same!

Surely he must be referring to their new friend, Aleck. But the sheriff had declared the boy to be a thief; and they could never believe Aleck that,

with his frank face, his clear eyes, and engaging manners. There must be some sort of a mistake; or else this so-called Artemus Rawson was a fraud of the first water, and just trying to get possession of that secret connected with the hidden mine, the same as Colonel Kracker!

Step Hen put a finger on his lips, and that told Davy to keep quiet, so that the others might not suspect their comrades in the other camp were entertaining the very boy these men sought at that particular minute.

And when he had the chance, Step Hen whispered a few words to Smithy that rather startled that worthy, who had apparently not noticed what was being said when the sheriff was talking; he having hurried over to try and cut some slices from the carcase of the big-horn, as he wished to get into the habit of doing these handy things about camp.

There now remained but Toby; and from the sly wink which the guide gave Step Hen, upon seeing the anxious look on the boy's face, it was plain that he had grasped the situation immediately, and they need not fear that he would betray Aleck.

While the two men were eating a little later, Step Hen tried to make up his mind as to what sort of a party this so-called Artemus Rawson might be. If he indeed proved to be a genuine brother of the man who had discovered the silver lode, and the real uncle of Aleck, then he must have been a different

sort of a man altogether from the boy's father. On his small, rat-like face scheming was written plainly; and the chances were, Step Hen concluded, that he too knew something about the " find " Aleck had lately made, and was plotting to get possession of that precious chart to the mine.

This gave Step Hen cause for sudden excitement. The sheriff had just said they could not stay all night with Toby and his charges; that they were bound in the direction of the valley, called by *business.* Then the chances were that they knew something of the boy's plans, and that he might be run across heading into the valley from the other side. They had laid out to meet him on the way, and take him by surprise.

What bothered Step Hen was the fact that the sheriff had just said they were likely to come upon the camp of the scouts on the way, between then and morning, and in case they did, he promised himself the pleasure of dropping in to take a bite of breakfast with the smart scoutmaster and his chums, whom he would like to meet very much.

Step Hen worried over this very nearly all the time the two men were eating. He thought those rat-like eyes of Artemus Rawson, so-called, were often searching his face, as though the man suspected that he knew something about the boy the sheriff had been engaged to find; and that being the case, the man would even go out of their way to

visit the camp of the scouts, to see whether the one they sought might be stopping there.

And how under the sun could Thad be warned of the impending trouble?

CHAPTER XVIII.

PURE PLUCK.

"WELL, I'm glad they're departed; because somehow I couldn't fancy that Mr. Rawson the least little bit," remarked Smithy, an hour later.

"Do you really think they have gone for good, Toby?" Step Hen asked, eagerly; "or might they just make believe, and hang around here to see if we had Aleck Rawson hidden away somewhere?"

"Oh! they're gone, that's right enough," replied the guide; "but I'm kinder of the notion they'll make it a p'int to pay a visit to the other camp by mornin', and p'raps sneak in on 'em by surprise like."

"Then you're of a mind that they have suspicions?" asked Step Hen.

"That thar Artemus Rawson I reckon he allers has s'picions of everybody," replied Toby; "an' I seen him watchin' you two boys pass winks an' nods when the sheriff, he happened to say the gent's name was Rawson."

"Then he must have guessed that we knew something about Aleck?" declared Davy.

"Reckon as how he did," Toby responded.

"But if that was so, how did it come that he never once asked us if we knew a boy by the name of Aleck Rawson?" Step Hen went on.

"He was jest a leetle too slick for that," the guide answered. "He knowed that you'd made up your mind to deny everything; and he guessed how the land laid. So right now, I shouldn't wonder a bit but what he's atellin' Bob all about it; an' showin' him how they'll as like as not find the boy they want right smack in the camp of the Boy Scouts."

"You're right, Toby!" cried Step Hen. "Now I remember that the sheriff seemed a little bit inclined to put up all night with us; but it was the other who said he wanted to be on the move. He even asked how long it would take to reach the main valley over on the other side of this ridge, by followin' the canyon route; and vowed he was good for a few hours' tramp, if the sheriff was agreeable."

"Yes, and he told how one of their hosses kim down lame, so they had to leave both animals in a place to rest up while they was in the mountains," remarked the guide; "but it's sure too bad the way things is a settin' for that boy."

"You mean Aleck, I guess, don't you, Toby?" asked Step Hen.

"Yes, Aleck Rawson. I wanted to see the kid

git that mine his dad found years ago; but seems to me the woods is full of people as think they orter have a claim on it, afore the fambly of Jerry Rawson. If so be this ole chap is a uncle to the boy, he's a bad egg; I kin see that in his face. But Sheriff Bob thinks he's doin' the right thing in tryin' to arrest Aleck; and he'll take him away, if he ever lays eyes on him. I say, it's too bad."

"If we only could warn them?" said Smithy, disconsolately.

"Mebbe we can," remarked Step Hen, eagerly, looking at the guide in the same breath, as though it depended a good deal upon Toby whether this idea could be carried out, or not.

"Oh! do you really mean it, Step Hen?" demanded Smithy, brightening up; for he seemed to be conscious of a new sense of reliance in the other nowadays, something similar to that he felt in Thad himself; Step Hen had been "doing things," and that alone breeds confidence.

"I'm wanting to ask Toby something first, before I promise," remarked the other, cautiously, as became one who valued his word not lightly.

"Go on, then; what is it?" asked the guide.

"Think hard, please," Step Hen continued, very soberly; "and tell me if you believe you could take me to a place, not a great ways off, where we would be able to see the tents of the home camp, if daylight was here."

Toby's face turned into a grin; evidently he grasped the idea that had flashed into the boy's mind. After having seen how Giraffe had "talked" with Aleck by means of "fire flashes," when the Rawson boy was away up on that ledge of the cliff, Toby was ready to believe these wonderful scouts capable of almost anything in the line of "next miracles."

"Say, yes, I kin do that same now; that is, if you think you'd be able to climb a leetle bit more," he broke out with.

"Oh! I am not all tuckered out yet," declared Step Hen, proudly; "a bit sore from my scratches, and that funny business, when I had to jump around so lively with two savage eagles tryin' to tear my eyes out; but you just show me, Toby, and see if I don't toe the mark, like a scout always should."

"I'm sure you will," said Toby, admiringly; and the look on his face gave Step Hen a sense of reward for all he had suffered; in fact he could not remember ever feeling so pleased before, because he knew Toby Smathers was reckoned a prime judge of men, as they ran.

"How long would it take us to get up there?" asked Step Hen, carelessly; yet no doubt with more or less anxiety, for he was conscious of the fact that however willing the spirit might be, the flesh was weak; and it meant a double trip, to go and come again.

"P'raps half an hour might do it," was the response of the guide.

"Up a place like this?" gasped Smithy, pointing to the wall near them.

"Well, I should hope not," said Davy Jones. "They'd be crazy to try that sort of thing, with only the moonlight to help."

Step Hen did not say anything, but nevertheless he waited with bated breath to hear the reply of the guide, and seemed easier in his mind when Toby remarked:

"I don't doubt as he'd foller me, if I sez we must climb up to the top of that same cliff agin; but 'tain't necessary. This time we foller a canyon up, till we gets to a p'int as gives ye a view of the valley. I don't sure know, but I reckons we orter to be able to ketch a glimpse of the fire."

"Then let's start right now!" cried Step Hen; "I'm all worked up with eagerness to block the little game that the old Rawson uncle is settin' up for poor Aleck. We said that we'd see the boy through, and we're going to do it, or drop in our tracks atryin'."

He managed to get on his feet, though only with an effort.

"Oh! yes, I admit I'm some stiff," he said in answer to Smithy's look of sympathy; "and I'd like as not let Davy do it in my place; only he ain't up in sendin' messages as much as I am. Wish

Giraffe was here; he's the boss hand at that. But p'raps I c'n make Thad understand. I only hope we get the camp, all right, that's all."

It was the spirit that makes heroes that forced Step Hen to quit that cozy camp, where he was feeling so nice and comfortable; and follow after the tireless guide, when he walked on up the canyon. But they would not hear a single groan from him, if he had to make his lips bleed, biting them with his teeth. Step Hen had always wondered just how the old martyrs felt, when they were being led to the stake; he believed he knew now; for he experienced a fierce sense of exultation with every twinge of pain that walking gave him; but with set teeth he kept grimly on.

That was a long half hour to the scout. He would never forget it to his dying day. And when Toby finally, after what seemed an eternity, announced that they must be very close on the point where in the moonlight much of the big valley could be seen dimly beyond, Step Hen mentally thanked his stars again and again.

Presently Toby turned, and looked.

"Here she is!" he remarked; and the boy grunted in reply; for there may be times when the spirit of thanksgiving is too deep for utterance.

"I see her," Toby remarked almost immediately afterwards.

"Do you mean the fire, Toby?" demanded Step Hen.

"It cain't be anything else, even though they've let it get low. And now we've a job afore us, to get some blaze started right here. Wood ain't too plenty round these parts. Let's look for some."

But when Step Hen started after him, the guide made him sit down to rest, promising to come to him when the fire was good and ready.

"Your part of the work will begin about that time; let me do this fire makin'," the good-hearted guide insisted; and the boy was only too willing to sink down.

A short time afterwards, when Toby came to announce that the fire was in full blast, with plenty of good brands that might be used for torches; he found poor Step Hen sound asleep, just as he had dropped, being utterly exhausted. The guide looked down at him with pity. He had taken a great fancy for the plucky scout; and disliked arousing him the worst kind; but there was no other way.

Step Hen had to be shaken half a dozen times before he would consent to open his heavy eyes; then he stared up at Toby, as though for the moment he could not place things.

"I got the fire started; and there's aplenty of wood handy arter all, for you to use as torches when you signal the camp!" said the guide, kindly.

"Oh!" cried Step Hen sitting up, "to be sure; and I really think I must have been dozing while you were doing all the work, Toby. Give me a hand, won't you, please; I'm ashamed to say my legs seem so silly stiff at the knees I just can't straighten 'em out? Wow! to think of me being such a baby as to feel that little circus this way. I'm real ashamed, that's what."

"You ain't got no call to be, I promise you, boy," declared the other, a tremor in his voice; "You showed the pluck of a grown man. And if I could a took yer place, which in course I couldn't, never havin' been trained to wigwag, or handle a telegraph key, I'd sure let you sleep on; for ye desarve it, that's right."

Step Hen made a few movements, regardless of the pain it gave him, so as to get his arms in working order; because he knew he would have to use them a great deal, if he were lucky enough to get an answer to his signals.

The guide showed him where to stand, where he would be in the shadow, and the blazing, moving torch show; and he then pointed out the distant fire, down through the gap in the mountain chain.

"They ain't touched it since we kim here," he remarked; "but that makes me think it might be done any minit now. So p'raps ye'd better show me the way to fling that there torch a ound, to let 'em

know we're here, an' wantin' to talk. I kin do that part, I reckons, an' save you some work."

Step Hen was agreeable, for he knew that he would have all he could do later on, to handle that beacon, should he find a chance to send the message he wanted the scoutmaster to get.

For some time Toby waved his torch around without there being any response; and it began to look as though he might have all his trouble for his pains, when Step Hen was heard to give a little eager cry.

"There!" he exclaimed, "I believe I saw a light move, just then. Yes, look, Toby, there it is again; and as sure as you live, they're answering us! Now, give me the torch. I only hope I haven't forgotten all I knew about sending messages, because all poor Aleck's hopes for his future may hang on my being able to warn them the sheriff and old Artemus Rawson are heading that way. Now watch close, Toby! I'm going to start in."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WARNING.

Step Hen was all of a tremble when he first began to handle that burning splinter of wood, provided by Toby Smathers, to serve as a fiery pen; and with which he hoped to write letters in the dark background he had chosen for his location.

Just as he had himself declared, regretfully now, Step Hen had never been a shining light in this code business. Indeed, up to lately, he had rather considered the whole thing something of a great bore; and when ordered out on the hills to wave signal flags, he had only obeyed under protest. There had been plenty of things he much preferred to this sort of detail work.

But after seeing how successfully a method of communication had been established between the scouts in camp, and Aleck, when the latter was being held a prisoner up on that shelf of rock, Step Hen had had his eyes opened. He realized what a really valuable thing a little knowledge along these lines was apt to prove, at most any time. And he had then and there resolved to improve his scanty share of information whenever the chance came.

Right now he was secretly glad that since that

occasion he had been asking some questions along the line of acquiring information. He had even had half an hour's practice with Thad, early in the morning, sending and receiving messages.

How fortunate that was, Step Hen reflected, just now, when he found himself placed in a position where a knowledge of wigwag work was going to prove of the utmost importance to the boy whom the scouts had taken in charge.

At the same time it was with considerable nervousness that he started in to ask his first question. He meant to inquire if the one answering him were Thad himself; but when he had made the last letter of the message Step Hen was afraid it might seem so bungled that all he would receive might be the well-known signal:

"Don't understand—repeat message!"

But to his delight there came the three letters:

"Yes."

Encouraged by this, Step Hen became more ambitious. He spelled out his own name, and added a few more words:

"This is Step Hen—something important!"

Then he almost held his breath as he waited to see what effect this would have. The answer began to come back, slowly and positively, Thad allowing plenty of time for the other to make sure of every sign. And staring eagerly, unconsciously spelling

aloud just as he received the message, Step Hen caught this:

"All right—understand—let us have news."

"It's going splendidly, Toby!" cried Step Hen, almost ready to jump up and down, in his excitement and joy, despite his wearied condition. "Thad's taking it, word for word. I reckon I c'n make him understand *something,* even if I am such a big bungler at this thing. But I tell you right now, after this I'm going in for wigwag work the hardest you ever saw. It's the greatest stunt a scout can follow up. Why, it's worth everything else at such a time as this. Now to tell him about the two men headed that way, and how they're after Aleck Rawson."

With that Step Hen once more applied himself to the task before him. His heart was set on doing something that the scoutmaster would compliment him on when next they met. Step Hen had aroused himself to the fact that an occasion like this demanded that a scout should prove his worth. It might mean a merit medal for him, if his services were deemed of sufficient value.

Toby, seeing that the torch would not be likely to last out the labored conversation that was to follow, busied himself in getting another ready. As he was as good a hand at a fire as Giraffe, this did not prove a heavy task.

Meanwhile Step Hen kept on sending his mes-

sages in short, jerky sentences. He lacked confidence in himself, and dared not launch boldly forth in a description of the strange thing that had happened since the four of them had made camp, after their big-horn hunt. When he had spelled a sentence he would almost invariably add the query, "understand?" meaning to repeat if the answer came in the negative. But Thad was an expert at this sort of work, and could puzzle out the meaning of what Step Hen so blunderingly sent, almost as though he might be a mind reader.

"Two men came into our camp after dark!" went the opening message.

"Yes," Thad replied, briefly, and evidently not meaning to say anything calculated to confuse the signal sender.

"One a sheriff, name Bob McNulty."

"Yes."

"Other older man,—name Artemus Rawson.—Get that?"

There was a little interval at that. Perhaps Thad might be figuring it out; or he may have mentioned the name aloud, and be speaking with some one who was near by, possibly asking Aleck if he recognized the name.

"Yes," came the flash, presently.

Step Hen had begun to grow cold. He felt that if he once found himself cornered, and making mistakes, he was apt to get rattled in his excitement,

and forget the little he really did know about sending and receiving. So when Thad replied that he had grasped even that name, the sender found himself imbued with another relay of confidence. When he started in once more, he sent a little faster, though the scoutmaster at the first opportunity warned him to go slow and sure.

"Say looking for Aleck—that he has robbed uncle—headed down valley when left here—Understand that?"

"Yes, but not so fast. Go on," came the reply.

Step Hen understood that Thad gave him this warning, not because he was himself unable to receive at that rate, for he had seen the patrol leader and Allan go smoothly along at twice the pace. He was thinking of Step Hen, for he knew what was apt to happen if once the other overstepped the bounds, and muddled himself up; as like as not he would get his signals mixed, and after that be utterly unable to send coherently.

"Be with you by morning—we think they suspect Aleck there—you know what to do."

"Yes. Good for you. Any more?"

Step Hen sighed with relief. The great burden of responsibility had fallen from his shoulders on to those broad ones of the scoutmaster. Yes, Thad would surely know what to do—he always did when the emergency arose. And that was what

made his chums feel such implicit confidence in their leader.

And Step Hen thought that while he was about it, and the message business working so very smoothly, he might as well let Thad know of their success; so he managed to say:

"We got two sheep!"

"Good again."

"Smithy shot one—I got other—had warm time I tell you. Anything new at the camp?"

"Sure. They came and paid us a visit," Thad replied, slowly, so that not a word did Step Hen lose as he spelled the message out.

"Do you mean Kracker?" he demanded.

"Yes. He tried to ride over us rough-shod; but we took him down a peg. Sent the three men away —kept their guns—looking out for them all the time—if you happen to meet hold them off—Toby will know."

That was an extra long one to take, and several times Step Hen had to wave his torch so as to interrupt the sender, and have him go back to the last period to repeat what he had to communicate. For of course Step Hen, like all new beginners in wig-wag work, telegraphy, and kindred things, was a better hand at sending than receiving; because in the one case he knew in his own mind what was coming next, and was not apt to get confused; while in taking a message, if he lost one small fraction of

the same, while his mind was grappling with that, he failed to catch the next letter, and thus was apt to become hopelessly entangled.

But thanks to the intelligennt manner in which Thad managed his end of the air wire, and the positive way in which he moved his fire pencil, the message was finally all grasped, though Step Hen was rapidly becoming exhausted by his efforts, and the mental strain that bore on him so heavily.

"Better quit thar!" advised the guide, who kept a close watch on things, and was able to understand just what the tired boy was enduring.

"Pretty soon, Toby," replied Step Hen, slowly. "I've done better than I ever thought I would, and Thad knows about that Artemus Rawson. He'll see to it that Aleck isn't around when they come to camp. Oh! ain't I glad though I brushed up my code work with him early in the morning, though. That business with Aleck in the night made me ashamed to be so dull. I want to ask him one more question, for there he's waving to know if I'm done."

"Get through quick, then; we orter be back in camp," said the guide, not unkindly, but because he saw the condition of Step Hen.

"What is it?" Thad was signaling, waiting each time after asking the question, to receive an answer.

"Will you have Aleck hide himself?" asked the other.

"Sure thing."

"We'll head back to camp in morning—have to get Smithy's horns first," went on Step Hen.

"Has he taken to growing a pair?" Thad asked, quizzically.

"His sheep I mean—lies back a bit—look for us about noon."

"That all?"

"Yes. Good-bye!"

The last wavering movements of Thad's torch far away in the distance told that he was echoing this concluding word. Then it vanished.

The talk-fest was over; and Step Hen felt that at least he had done himself proud for one who had paid so little attention to this really important adjunct to the education of a Boy Scout.

"And mark me, Toby," he mumbled as the guide kindly threw an arm about his tottering figure, though Step Hen hardly comprehended the fact, "I'm agoin' to take up wigwag work after this, sure I am. Never thought it could be so interestin'. It's sure great. Here's our camp, ain't it? You tell the boys what I did, won't you Toby; I'm feelin' kinder tired like? Guess I'll sit down a spell."

Davy Jones and Smithy were wild to know how it had all turned out; and while the murmur of the guide's voice sounded, as he related the story of the

message sending, poor played-out Step Hen sank to the ground, dead for sleep.

In less than two minutes he was lost to the world, the last thing he heard being the low voice of Toby Smathers, recounting the recent splendid feat of the scout whose message had undoubtedly saved Aleck Rawson from impending trouble.

CHAPTER XX.

SHERIFF BOB'S BOMB EXPLODES.

"THERE they come!"

It was the observant "Old Eagle Eye," as some of the boys called Giraffe, who gave utterance to these words.

Early morning was at hand. All through the balance of the night those left in the camp in the valley had been momentarily expecting to have the sheriff and his older companion drop in on them; but possibly Artemus may have found himself unable to travel as fast as his ambition would force him, and the pair had been compelled to rest up somewhere on the road.

Every one in the camp was of course on the line of duty at daybreak. While Bumpus and Bob White started to get breakfast, Giraffe and Allan

were using their eyes as best they could, seeing that the mists still hung over the valley, obscuring things at a little distance.

Thad was invisible, also Aleck. Truth to tell they had betaken themselves off within an hour after that astounding message was received from the far-distant point where Step Hen waved his fiery torch.

Of course, one of the first things Thad had done was to question the other concerning this man who called himself Artemus Rawson. Aleck admitted that he was in truth his own uncle; but added that the lawyer from Denver had fallen under the same spell as many others, and was allowing himself to dream of being the one to re-discover the long-lost mine.

Aleck had said that it seemed as though every one who heard about it became imbued with a mad desire to possess the treasure. There was Kracker who had made several long searching trips up here with that one object in view; and was even then doing everything in his power to get possession of the secret.

Crafty Uncle Artemus had gone about it in a different way. He had hung around the dwelling-place of the widow, and in his sly, lawyer-like method, tried to learn what was going on. He suspected that the secret of the location of the mine had been discovered in some way, from the change

in the atmosphere about the Rawson home, and the air of excitement that could not easily be subdued; but no matter how he tried, he could not learn just what it all meant.

Then came the sudden vanishing of Aleck. This must have given the lawyer points and he started after the boy. His accusation concerning his nephew having robbed him was of course all a part of a fine little scheme he had hatched up. While the big prospector believed in actual force to squeeze the secret from the unwilling lips of the lad; shrewd Uncle Artemus was inclined to try and make a show of having the law on his side.

But in both cases, actually robbery was intended.

And Thad believed every word of the explanation made by Aleck. He could not have done otherwise, looking in those frank and fearless eyes, and reading the clean soul of the Rawson boy.

So the scoutmaster had decided that he and Aleck would disappear from the valley camp for a short time, leaving no trail by which they could be followed. He did not tell a single one of his chums just what the plan was, because he was desirous of keeping the secret. Then, in case the sheriff questioned them concerning the movements of the missing two, they could truthfully declare they did not know a thing about them.

But Thad made preparations looking to the carrying-out of a bold project which he and the

Rawson boy had talked over between themselves. This was nothing more nor less than a hunt for the long-hidden silver mine!

Thad thought that the sooner Aleck made sure his little chart, found concealed in the back of that small pocket mirror which his dying father had placed in his hands, was correct, the better.

And that accounted for several queer things he did on leaving camp, one of which, the taking of the only lantern they had brought with them, astonished Bumpus very much indeed, not to mention Giraffe and Bob White.

The Fox had not been invited to join in the expedition; but later on it was found that he had disappeared. Still, no one was worried, for it seemed to be taken for granted that he must have followed Thad and Aleck. They remembered that the latter had claimed a long-standing friendship with the Fox. And it was also known that the Crow boy had become an ardent admirer of the scoutmaster, whom he believed to be a chief worth serving.

When Old Eagle Eye, then, announced that the two men were coming, the others craned their necks to look. Allan told them not to appear too curious; and so those who were busy at the fire went on with their culinary labors, cooking a bountiful breakfast, as it seemed that they might have company.

Sheriff Bob and the lawyer soon strode into

camp—at least the officer did the striding part, for old Artemus seemed pretty nearly fagged out. A burning desire to acquire a glorious fortune so easily was all that kept him up, otherwise he would never have been able to have stood the long tramp as he did.

The first thing the sheriff did after replying to the salutation of Allan, was to scan each one of the four boys in turn, and then turning to his companion, say tersely:

"None of these the one you want, I reckon, sir?"

The old Denver lawyer looked dreadfully disappointed. His ferrit-like eyes had flitted from one to another of the scouts, and each time he changed base his long cunning face grew more like a blank.

"No, my nephew isn't in sight, as I can see, Sheriff," he replied, with a frown, and a look toward Allan, as though to say that it was his opinion the boy might produce the one they sought, if proper force were applied.

"Having a hunt up here in the mountains, are you, boys?" asked the sheriff, as he followed the example of the lawyer, and dropped down near the fire, crossing his legs tailor-fashion, as though he meant to make himself quite at home.

"Yes, we want to get a big-horn or so to take back with us," replied Allan.

"Just the four of you?" continued the other, arching his heavy brows as if with surprise.

"Oh! no, there are a lot of other fellows," replied the scout who took Thad's place as leader when the other happened to be absent.

"Oh! that's it, eh? Rest off on a little side hunt right now, I reckon. P'raps you've got a guide along with you, too?" the officer continued, bending his neck, so that he could see inside the nearest tent, the flap of which happened to be on the side toward him, and thrown back to allow of ventilation.

"Oh! yes, we've got a guide now, though for a long time we had to go it alone, and managed to get on pretty well," Allan continued, wondering why it was he could catch a peculiar quizzical gleam in the snapping eyes of the other, once in a while, when the sheriff looked straight at him.

"Who is he; perhaps I might happen to know him?" asked the other, accepting a tin cup filled with coffee, from Bumpus.

"I'm sure you do, sir," Allan hastened to remark; and then, remembering that he was not supposed to know of the visit the sheriff and his employer had paid to the camp of the big-horn hunters on the previous night, he hastened to add: "everybody knows honest Toby Smathers," the forest ranger, I should think."

"Well, I should say, yes, I did," replied the

other, commencing to calmly devour the piece of venison that had been placed on his platter, as though his appetite was sharp indeed this bracing morning. "And so you boys have come away out here just to see what we've got in these Rockies, eh?"

"Just what we have, sir," replied Giraffe, thinking that he would like to have the sheriff notice him a little.

"And I declare, you seem to be fixed pretty comfortable like," the other went on. "Just look at the tents they brought with them, Mr. Rawson. I've always said that on the whole they were better than the old-fashioned tents. You can see how the heat of the fire on a cold night is sent back into the tent; and there's aplenty of head-room here. Yes, both of 'em as cozy as you please."

He had seemed so very much interested in the subject that he even laid down his tin cup and platter, and gaining his feet, passed over, to peer into each tent, as if bent on ascertaining what the interior looked like.

Allan, of course, knew just what this meant. The sheriff was looking for Aleck, as if he half-expected to find the hunted boy concealed under a pile of blankets. And yet it puzzled Allan to note that, in spite of the keen disappointment which would naturally follow a failure to locate the boy, Sheriff Bob was even chuckling as he once more sat

him down in the circle, and resumed operations on his breakfast.

Something seemed to be amusing him, Allan wished he could tell what. He felt it must have some connection with the search for Aleck Rawson; though for the life of him he could not decide what was in the sheriff's mind.

The talk soon became general, though Artemus took no part in it. He sent a beseeching glance every now and then in the direction of the officer, as if begging him to do something; but whatever it might be, evidently Sheriff Bob was in no hurry, and meant to finish that good breakfast first, anyway.

Presently, as he emptied his platter the second time, and swallowed his third cup of scalding Java the officer remarked:

"I know something about the Boy Scouts myself, it happens. Got a youngster down below that belongs to a troop. Great thing. Teaches lads lots of the right kind of outdoor business. Makes 'em healthy, and able to depend on themselves a heap. My kid, he's dead stuck on this signal business with flags and such. Glad to see it, too. Takes me back to old times, as sure as you live."

He stopped there, and seemed to reflect. It was as though memories might be arising that were pleasant to look back upon. Meanwhile Allan was conscious of something like a little thrill passing

through him. He seemed to feel that this was no accidental mention on the part of the man with the twinkle in his eye; but in fact, it might have something deep back of it.

"Yes," Sheriff Bob went on, presently, turning straight toward Allan now. "I used to belong in the army years ago—spent six years of my life in the Signal Corps, and was accounted a pretty good operator in wigwag, telegraph, telephone building, and heliograph work while I served. And honest now, I must say I never enjoyed a finer half hour than I spent last night, sitting on a rock up yonder, and watching that lively little confab you held with your chum, who, I think was the boy calling himself Step Hen. He did the job up pretty well, considering; and as for your Thad, he's chain lightning on the send. Yes, siree bob, that was a picnic to an old Signal Corps man like me, as you can easily understand, my boy!"

The four scouts sat there as if frozen stiff. Consternation was written all over their faces; and no wonder the humorous sheriff, as he saw what a bomb he had exploded, chuckled, and then laughed aloud.

CHAPTER XXI.

HEARING ALECK'S SIDE OF THE STORY.

THAT good and hearty laugh on the part of the sheriff did more to reassure the scouts than anything else could have done. Giraffe, who had been holding his very breath in consternation, allowed the air to flow in and out of his lungs again; Bumpus regained his color, while his staring eyes concluded apparently not to pop out of his head this time; and as for Allan and Bob White, they lost some of the look of alarm that had spread over their faces.

"Yes, it was as good as a circus to just sit thar, and enjoy reading that little talk," the sheriff went on to say. I could 'most imagine myself back again in the army, out in the Philippines, teachin' some of the awkward squad their p's and q's. And the news was some interestin', too. So Aleck, he was to make himself scarce, was he? Seems like he did that same, too," with another chuckle, and a shrug of his shoulders toward the tents which he had so lately examined without profit.

Allan hardly knew what to say; but boldly taking up the cudgels he presently remarked:

"Well, Mr. Sheriff, what else could we do?

Aleck was a scout, one of our organization; and if you've got a son who belongs to it, you must know that a scout is always supposed to be ready to hold out a helping hand to a fellow member. Aleck was in trouble. He had fallen into the hands of a party of prospectors, headed by Colonel Kracker, who were bent on forcing him to give up the secret they thought he carried, concerning the long-lost silver mine his father was said to have discovered years ago."

"H'm! say you so, boy?" the other observed, while the lawyer pricked up his ears, as if suddenly interested. "Kracker around here, is he? Well, that's some interesting news, you're telling me. You say the boy had fallen into their hands, and that you rescued him?"

"If you'd like to hear about it, I'll be only too glad to tell you," Allan went on to say, eagerly; for somehow he had already taken quite a fancy toward this sheriff with the humorous twinkle in his eye, and thought it only right to make a friend of him, if it could be done.

"All nonsense, Mr. Sheriff," spluttered old Artemus, who feared lest his case might be losing its grip, and that the officer would refuse to aid him even were the boy found. "He's trying to swing your sympathies around against my interests. Remember that you carry a warrant, and are sworn to serve it."

"I always does my duty, Mr. Rawson, don't you fear," replied the sheriff, with a frown; "but just now it's a part of my business to hear all I can concerning the way your nephew came to join in with these Boy Scouts. Now, just go on telling me what you started to say, my boy."

At that Allan picked up fresh courage. The sheriff was inclined to favor them, he realized, even at the expense of straining his "duty."

"Why, one of our number, Giraffe here," he said, "happened to be practicing the wigwag code outside the camp, in the darkness, using a brand he'd picked from the fire; when to his astonishment he saw answering signals from what seemed to be the sky. Well, when we made out the one word 'help!' you see our interest was at once raised to fever pitch."

"I should say it would be," remarked Sheriff Bob, showing the deepest attention, as though the prospect for developments in the story began to excite him.

"Our scoutmaster took matters in hand," Allan went on. "You just said he was clever at sending and receiving messages. Well, he's a cracker-jack, that's what he is. And it so happened that Aleck, he not only belonged to the scouts, and had learned everything about signaling; but he served as a telegraph operator for a short time on a side road, when the regular man was taken sick; so he could even

beat our Thad at talking with his hands; and that's going some, I tell you."

"But what was Aleck doing up there; and where was he at the time?" asked the deeply interested sheriff.

"Kracker and his two men had caught Aleck; and unable to make him tell what they wanted, what do you think the cowards did? Lowered the boy down to a shelf on the face of the cliff, and left him there, saying he would starve unless he weakened, and gave up his secret; which Aleck vows belongs to his mother alone, and nothing on earth would make him betray."

"And they left him there, did they?" growled Sheriff Bob, frowning in a way to indicate his opinion of the said Kracker.

"Just what they did. He saw us come into the valley, but thought we might only be some more of the same kind of wolves, wanting to torture a poor boy. But when he saw Giraffe, here, making letters with his fire-stick, something told Aleck we must be Boy Scouts. So, finding some wood on the ledge, he managed to make a little fire in a crack that ran into the rock; and with a brand from this he started to call, repeating that one word over and over again—'help'!"

"This here is some interesting to me, son," remarked the big sheriff, as Allan paused to get his breath, for he was talking so fast and so eagerly

that he had almost exhausted himself. "And so, after you learned where he was, and how he came to be thar, I reckon now you boys started to climb up and rescue the other—how?"

"That's what we did, sir," broke in Giraffe, eagerly. "Four of us, counting the guide, managed to climb up the mountain, and with a rope we carried, hooked Aleck up off that ledge the prettiest you ever saw, that's what we did," with a defiant look toward old Artemus, who was sniffing through all this talk, just as though he refused to believe a word of it.

"And that's the way we came to have him in our camp, sir," Allan went on to say. "We heard his story, and believed it, too. He's got a mother, and a lot of little sisters, who look to him to carry out the work his father started. But every one who ever hears a word about that hidden mine Jerry Rawson once found, seems to be just crazy to take it away from his widow. She has hardly a single friend to trust. Even her relatives plot to beat her out of this valuable mining property, and try all sorts of things, in hopes of getting hold of the secret. And now you know just where we stand, Mr. Sheriff. As scouts we must stay friends of Aleck. He *was* here, just as you know; but he's gone away, and none of us know where to. Thad took him off during the night, and all he said was we might expect to see him again when he showed

up. So you can't pump any information out of us, you see."

"And even if we knew anything, we wouldn't tell," asserted Giraffe, belligerantly, feeling that the honor of a scout was in question right then.

The sheriff looked from one to another of those four boyish faces.

"By George! now, I reckon it wouldn't be any use in me tryin' to scare you by threatening to jail you for aiding in the escape of a desperate criminal, would it?" he remarked, pretending to look very serious, but with that twinkle again in evidence, as Allan saw.

"You just couldn't;" declared Giraffe, while Bumpus began to move a little uneasily in his seat; "in the first place, we don't know anything more'n we've told you; secondly, we haven't assisted anybody to escape, because we're right here, johnny-on-the-spot, and it's our scoutmaster who's gone; and then, last of all, there ain't any desperate criminal at all; only a poor, persecuted boy, with the grit that you just want your own chap to show, Mr. Sheriff,—ready to fight everybody, for the sake of his mother and sisters."

Sheriff Bob wagged his head slowly, as though mentally digesting what the other had just said.

"H'm! that remains to be seen, boy," he remarked; although Giraffe believed he did not feel one-half as ferocious as he chose to look just then.

"Duty is duty, no matter how unpleasant it may seem, sometimes."

"I'm glad to hear you take that sensible view of the matter, Mr. Sheriff," said the old Denver lawyer, in his oily tones. "You mustn't believe one-tenth of what boys say. They would as soon prevaricate as eat their breakfast; that is, some of the breed would, though doubtless your son is an exception to the rule. These scouts, as they choose to call themselves, have fixed up a story to suit themselves, and they hope to enlist your sympathy; but I know that a stern sense of duty will compel you to close your ears to anything they may say. I demand that you exercise every effort possible, looking to the immediate arrest of my rascally nephew, Alexander Rawson, whom I accuse of stealing valuable papers from my pocketbook while I was a guest under his mother's roof, and then disappearing."

"Oh! very well, sir, don't excite yourself about my movements," remarked Sheriff Bob, assuming a pompous air, though Allan thought he winked slily in his direction while speaking. "You will find no cause to complain to my superiors concerning any shortcomings on my part. And up to now, you must admit I have been unflagging in my endeavor to locate the fugitive from justice. Make your mind easy, Mr. Rawson, I see my duty clear in the premises, and can be depended on to do it."

Watching his chance a little later Allan followed the sheriff, when the latter went to get a drink of water near by. Artemus looked as though he wanted to keep them from having any communications out of his range of hearing; but he sank back in his seat again, plainly afraid of invoking the anger of the big sheriff, who, he already felt, did not feel any too warmly toward him and his cause.

And as they sat down by the little stream to dip up some of the clear water with the tin cup Sheriff Bob had made sure to fetch along, Allan made it a point to tell the other all that Aleck had said about the motives of his father's lawyer brother, and how for a long time he had bothered the widow, trying to find out if she knew anything about the hidden mine; which until lately of course she had not.

Allan knew how to talk. Moreover, he had an interested listener in the officer, and that counted for a great deal. Besides, he felt deeply for the persecuted boy, and his heart was filled with a desire to assist him secure the legacy left by his father, than whom no living soul had ever gazed upon the hidden mine.

Sheriff Bob listened to all that the boy said. Several times he scratched his head reflectively, and made a grimace, as though conflicting forces had begun to engage him in an inward war.

And when finally Allan declared that he now

knew all, the officer drew a long breath, and remarked, quietly:

"I seem to smell a pretty good-sized rat about this game Mr. Artemus is putting up; but as I said, the warrant he swore out is in my hands for serving, and I just reckon I'll have to do my sworn duty and arrest this same Aleck—that is, if so be he shows up while we're around here."

Allan looked him squarely in the eye; and he was sure one of the lids above the blue orbs of the official dropped a little in a suggestive way.

He too drew a long breath, and with a smile on his boyish face, said as he arose:

"Thank you, Mr. Sheriff, thank you very much!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GUARDIAN OF THE SILVER LODE.

As has been mentioned before, Thad had a plan in view when he left the camp in company with Aleck, somewhere about midnight. Though for certain reasons which he considered good, he had not seen fit to take a single one of his comrades into his confidence, the scoutmaster believed that the only way for Aleck to win his own game was to find the long-lost mine, and take possession of the same

in the name of his father, who had been the original discoverer of the lode.

Scores of hungry prospectors, besides Kracker, had done everything in their power to locate the mine; though none had descended to his last unworthy methods of trying to torture Jerry Rawson's son, in the hope of profiting thereby. As the claim of the original discoverer rested only on a scant foundation, of course the man lucky enough to find the silver lode again would have a right to hold possession, in the eye of the law. He might choose to pay the widow something, but even that was a matter resting solely upon his conscience.

Thad had a reason for carrying the only lantern belonging to the scouts; and he hoped that if they were so lucky as to find that Aleck's rude little chart told the truth, they might utilize that means of illumination when entering the mine.

Of course both of them carried their guns, for there was no telling when they could return to camp. An arrangement had been with Allan, so that day and night there would be a sign shown, calculated to tell the absent ones whether the coast were clear, or the lawyer and sheriff still hovered near by, waiting to entrap the Rawson boy, should he show up.

They had moved along for some time, when Aleck broke the silence by saying, with considerable feeling in his voice:

"It makes me glad to know you believed what I told you, Thad, about that business of my uncle. If you could only meet up with him once, I'm sure you'd know the tricky kind of man he is, just from his looks, and the smooth way he talks. But no matter what they all do and say, I'm just bound to carry my plans out. My mother approves of what I am doing; and she is thinking of me, and praying all the time I'm up here, trying to take dad's place."

"Don't mention it," said Thad, quickly. "Of course we all believe every word you told us, no matter whether we've met this rascally uncle of yours or not. Our chum Step Hen did, and I reckon he wasn't much impressed with him, from the way he talked. And as you belong to the scouts, our first duty is to stand by you through thick and thin."

"Only as long as you believe in my word, Thad," added the other.

"That's true," returned the other, quickly; "even a scout has no business sticking up for a comrade when he knows the other is in the wrong; but we believe in you, Aleck. And if only you could find that mine, I feel sure all of this funny business would stop. Once you had put in a claim, with the proper witnesses, and hurried to file it before the court, nobody could steal it away. And that's going to be just where the Boy Scouts can help you."

"Well, we'll know more than we do now, before a great many hours," asserted the miner's son; "unless this little map is all wrong, and poor dad only believed he had found a rich lode. But remember, he brought home specimens that were nearly pure silver; and every one who saw them said they beat the world for richness. I can remember my dad saying that there were tons and tons without end of that same sort, in *his* mine. And then he was suddenly taken down sick, and died with the secret untold. All these long years, when we've been poor and wanting many things, there that secret lay in my hand, oh! hundreds of times, and I never dreamed of it still accident showed me the paper, back of the glass in the little pocket mirror that dad had carried with him a long time."

They relapsed into silence again for a long time, each busy with his thoughts. Aleck knew what few simple directions his rude chart carried; he had gazed at it so many times that it was photographed on his mind, and there had been no need for him to rip the seam of his coat, and take the slip of faded paper out. Kracker had not dreamed how near the coveted clue had been to his hands, at the time he actually held the boy, and closely examined all his pockets.

"It's lucky," remarked Thad, after fully an hour more had passed, with both boys pushing forward steadily all the time, over rugged ways that severely

tried their abilities—" it's lucky, I say, that we are heading exactly away from the direction where that Sheriff, and your uncle, must be coming from."

" Yes, but I knew we'd do that before we ever started out," replied Aleck.

" You've been sizing up the region all day in camp, and laying your plans, if the chance ever came to try them out; isn't that so, Aleck? "

" You never said truer words in your life, Thad," answered the other. " I found a pretty high rock on which I could perch; and that gave me a chance to look over in this region with those fine glasses of yours. And I tell you now, it gave me a great thrill when I recognized something dad had marked on that little chart. It seemed just as if I could hear his voice calling me from the grave, and telling me I was doing the right thing—to go ahead, no matter who tried to stop me."

" What sort of a land-mark was it you saw? " asked the other scout.

" Why, you see, he made a rough sketch of a rock that looks a whole lot like a human head," Aleck went on to say, earnestly.

" Why, hello! I remember noticing that very same rock, the time I went up to take a look, and see if I could get a glimpse of our hunter squad. While about it, I turned the glasses around, to see if there were any sheep on the sides of the mountains to the south. And it was right then I saw

that outline of a face, cut in the rock, just like somebody had used a giant chisel and made it—nose, mouth, chin, forehead, all complete. It startled me a little at first, Aleck."

"I should guess it would, Thad; but think what it meant to *me,* when I had seen it on dad's little chart; and knew that the entrance to his hidden mine lay almost in the shadow of that face! I think he looked on it as the rock guardian to his silver lode."

"Is that a fact?" ejaculated Thad, partaking in a measure of the excitement that shook the frame of his companion; "Well, that's more than you've seen fit to tell me before, Aleck; and it's some interesting, I own up."

"I meant to tell you everything, Thad, believe me," declared the other, quickly, and with some emotion. "After the fine way you and your chums rescued me from that shelf up on the face of the cliff, and said you'd stand by me, no matter what happened, why, I made up my mind that I would keep nothing back from you. By to-morrow I expected to take the map out from the lining of my coat, where it was sewed in by my mother's own dear hands, so that nobody would ever think things had been disturbed at all. And now, I'm surely hoping that we'll both set eyes on dad's mine before another dawn breaks."

"For your sake, Aleck, I hope that will come

true. You deserve all the luck in the world, and that's what every one of our fellows say. But only for this moonlight I'm afraid we'd have had a hard job of it, coming all this distance; because the way is mighty rough, and both of us have stumbled lots of times as it is. We might have used the lantern, of course, but that would have put it out of business later, when we wanted it bad; and besides, it's flickering might have told our enemies where we were."

Aleck felt a thrill of pleasure at the way the other used that word "our;" why, it was just as though the Silver Fox Patrol had adopted him into the troop; and meant to make his cause their own. For a boy who had seldom had a friend to give him even words of encouragement, this was a glorious happening indeed. He felt that it had been the luckiest hour of his whole life when, in the midst of his bitter dejection, left alone on that high and isolated rocky ledge, he had discovered the strange movements of that fiery pencil, that seemed to be making all sorts of extravagant figures and circles in the air, which he knew stood for the means of communication between scouts.

"Let us work our way around this spur," he said, a while later, after they had continued to advance further into the depths of the mountains.

"I can guess what you are thinking," Thad went

on to remark; "you believe that we must even now be in the neighborhood of that rock face."

"Well, I've tried to judge the distance, and how we got along; and it seems to me we ought to be nearly there. What do you think, Thad?" asked the other; and from his manner it was evident that he laid considerable importance on the opinion of his companion.

"Just what you do, which is, that we must be getting close to where we saw that great head outlined just as if some scupltor had chiseled it from the solid rock. But even if we fail to find it, Aleck, that may be because of the formation of the mountain. Besides, this moonlight is awfully deceptive, you know."

"Wait, and we'll soon learn," was the confident answer. "I sat there, and looked for nearly an hour. I guess I got every rock fixed on my mind."

"Well, I've had a few of the same impressed on my knees and shins," chuckled the scoutmaster, drily. "But we've no need to complain, because, considering all the things we've had to fight against, I reckon we've escaped pretty slick. See anything yet, Aleck?"

"No, I own that I don't; but then, that may come from lots of causes," the other boy replied, trying not to let his disappointment show in his manner or speech; for he knew that Thad did not believe in a display of weakness in scouts. "Per-

haps, when we've pushed on a little further, we may be able to glimpse the face again."

"Wait right here," said Thad, suddenly.

"Oh! did you hear anything? Wouldn't it be too unbearably hard if we learned that some one, perhaps that cruel prospector, Colonel Kracker, had been ahead of us, and located the hidden mine? He could hurry to enter his claim, and my poor mother would not stand a ghost of a show. Was it a voice you heard, Thad?"

"I didn't hear anything to bother me," came the reply, accompanied with a low chuckle. "I was only thinking how often we strain ourselves to see something away off, when all we have to do is to turn our eyes up and look."

Aleck instantly "caught on" to what his companion meant. He bent his head back, and gave utterance to a low cry of satisfaction.

"Well, if that doesn't beat anything?" he ejaculated, apparently highly pleased; "it's the head, as sure as I live, and towering right above us, almost. No wonder I couldn't see it, looking away off, and thinking it lay further on. We've found the land-mark dad set down in his little map, Thad. And now to discover the crack in the wall, hidden by the hanging vines, where he followed a fox in, just out of curiosity, and discovered the richest silver lode he ever knew about. Oh! I'm just shaking all over with excitement. And I sure hope my

mother's thinking about me right now, thinking, and praying for me to succeed!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A WOLF BROOD IN THE WAY.

It was plain to the young scoutmaster that Aleck had studied his map carefully. For after he had taken his bearings anew, from the rocky head that towered almost above them, the other was able to make a direct course to the foot of an adjoining cliff, where the moonlight fell upon the chalky wall.

Thad saw first of all that there were strange markings across the face of this cliff, or rather running up and down. They consisted of several thicknesses, and as the boys drew closer, he discovered that what he suspected before was the truth; and that these were caused by vines that ascended for various distances, clinging tenaciously to the rock wall.

Toward their base they seemed of unusual thickness; and it was easily believable that one of these might conceal a fissure in the rock, just as Aleck had mentioned, when speaking of the way his father discovered the entrance to Aladdin's Cave of treasure.

The boy seemed to be counting these dark veins traversing the face of the cliff, and when they came to the fourth one he stopped still.

"There it is, Thad, the vines he marked, fourth from the right!" he said, in a low and trembling voice, as though the intensity of his feelings almost overcame him.

"Yes, I can see it," replied the other, steadily, feeling that he must bolster up Aleck's courage in this trying time. "And we want to know right away whether it really does hide a gap in the rock. Come on, Aleck!"

He led the way forward, with the other half holding back. Feverish with impatience though Aleck might be, to know whether all his hopes were doomed to be shattered then and there, or allowed to blossom forth into glorious buds of promise, the poor boy suddenly felt a weakness come upon him. Only for his having such a staunch-hearted chum at his elbow, ready to take the lead, there is no telling how long Aleck Rawson might have hesitated there, before that mass of clinging vines, afraid to take his courage in both hands, and push on to the goal.

But it was different with Thad. He strode up to the vines, and with one sweep drew them aside. The act disclosed a fissure that was several feet in width at its base, and running some distance up the wall; although growing gradually smaller, until

finally it merged into the gloom that held sway aloft, back of the screen of vines.

Aleck gave a low cry of rapture.

"It's here, just as he said it would be, in this map I carry!" he exclaimed, as he clutched the arm of the scoutmaster. "I hope I'm not dreaming all this, Thad; tell me I'm not, please, that's a good fellow."

"Well," replied the other, laughing gently so as to convince Aleck that he was perfectly cool and collected, and ought to know what he talked about; "so far as it goes, your map is absolutely correct, Chum Aleck; and I don't see any reason to doubt the rest of the story. In my opinion we're going to discover something fine before a great many minutes go past."

"What shall we do, Thad; you see, I'm so upset with it all, that somehow I look to you to arrange things. Perhaps if I was alone, and just *had* to depend on myself, I'd do better; but it's so kind of you to help me out, and you're so capable of doing it all. Please fix it up as you think best."

"All right, then," returned Thad, readily. "First of all, I'll light our little glim here; for if we're going to poke along into that black hole, I reckon we'll be wanting some sort of light to see by. Don't think I'd like to take a tumble down some precipice, myself; not to speak of running across a wild beast."

"What makes you say that last, Thad?" demanded the other, quickly; "do you get a scent of it, too?"

"I had an idea I did, and somehow it made me think of a menagerie. Hold up just a minute, and we'll be able to see something."

As he spoke Thad struck a match, which he applied to the wick of the lantern. It was a good type of its kind, and as soon as the wick had been properly adjusted no one could reasonably complain about the quality of the illumination produced.

This done, the patrol leader hastened to lower the lantern so that he could examine the ground close to the bottom of the fissure in the rock.

"Plenty of tracks, all right," was his first comment.

"Can you make them out, and is it a bear?" asked Aleck, almost unconsciously swinging his gun a little further to the front, while his fingers sought the lock.

"Well, no; the marks differ very much from the tracks of a bear, either a black or a cinnamon. They look more like made by a dog's paws," Thad replied.

"But a dog wouldn't be up here; you must mean it's a wolf, that's what, Thad," Aleck hastened to observe.

"If that was a guess, you hit the nail square on the head, Aleck," chuckled the scoutmaster. "A

wolf has been using this hole in the rock for a den; and from all I can make out, the tracks seem pretty fresh, too."

"Then you think the old chap is in there now, do you?" asked the other.

"I wouldn't like to say;" replied Thad; "but there's just one thing we've got to do, and that is, believe it to be so. A wolf caught in a trap is some dangerous, they tell me; and in case this happens to be a mother wolf, with a litter of whelps, she'd fight like everything, believe me."

"But we're going in, Thad; ain't we; you won't let that stand us off, after coming so far, will you? Oh! if there were a dozen wolves, and every one of them ready to fight from the word go, I'd just *have* to learn the truth before I left here. For her sake I'd take any risk to know."

"Well, I should say we were going in; and right away at that," returned Thad, taking a step forward. "I only thought I ought to put you on your guard, so that in case we came on the thing, you'd know what to expect. Have you got your gun all ready to shoot, Aleck?"

"Believe me, yes; and while I don't want to brag, still I've always called myself a pretty good shot, even at a jumping wolf," replied the other; since he now knew that Thad did not mean to be deterred by any sort of ordinary difficulty, Aleck

began to seem like himself, being able to keep his feelings in restraint.

That was the influence of a cool, determined comrade, like the scoutmaster. Such a firm, collected spirit always exerts considerable influence over those with whom it comes in personal contact.

Thad held the lantern. He preferred doing so, even though it must necessarily interfere more or less with his taking any sort of aim, should the occasion suddenly arise whereby it become necessary for him to fire. But then, it was very important, Thad thought, that they keep the lantern intact; and of course he had never been alongside Aleck in action, so he could not tell just what sort of coolness the other would display when a time of excitement arrived.

Besides, when one is perfectly at home with a gun, it is possible to shoot without ever raising the weapon to the shoulder. Instinct takes the place of aim on such an occasion; some people call it "shooting from the hip," and that would be as good a designation for the method of pulling a hasty trigger, as any other.

Of course, they kept close together. This was rendered necessary by the narrowness of the fissure, even had not their personal wishes in the matter forced the two lads to touch elbows.

They strained their eyes as they slowly advanced,

looking ahead most of the time, yet not neglecting to also observe the walls as they passed.

And already Thad was beginning to notice a peculiarly marked streak here and there, that had a rather dingy, black look, and which he strongly suspected might, on investigation, prove to be the outcropping of the marvelous ore of silver, which, further on had been revealed to the startled eyes of the prospector, years ago, doubtless causing him to blink, and pinch himself, under the belief that he must be only indulging in a maddening dream, such as all of his class are visited with from time to time.

But before they could pay the slightest attention to these things it became absolutely necessary that they find out the truth about that wolf business. And as they pushed steadily inward they were constantly on the alert for the first sign that would give warning of danger.

"I heard something like a growl, then!" whispered Aleck, suddenly.

"Sure thing," answered the other, steadily; "and we ought to get a sight of the animal's eyes, quick enough now. Look for twin fires, that burn like phosphorus in the dark. And hold your gun on them as soon as you sight them, but don't shoot till I give the word, unless the beast charges us."

Ten seconds later, another and different sound came to their strained hearing.

"Cubs whining, as I live!" ejaculated Thad, half under his breath.

"Then it's a she wolf?" said the other.

"I reckon it is," the scoutmaster answered.

"But what are you waiting for, Thad?" Aleck demanded; "I suppose that makes it a tougher proposition; but now I've come this far, I've just got to go through to the end."

"We will, all right, Aleck, never fear. I was just holding back to see if my eyes would get a little more accustomed to the dark over there; but now we can go on again. Ready all the while, are you?"

"Yes, indeed I am, Thad. Now I think I can see what you said I would."

"Meaning her yellow eyes glistening with fierce madness; because there's nothing more ready to fight a hundred enemies than a mother wolf with whelps. Steady, forward we go, slow but sure!"

"All right, Thad; I'm as cool as anything now; all my excitement seems to have gone when there's real danger afoot," remarked Aleck, in an even voice that backed up his words.

"I knew that would be so, Aleck," replied the other, in a low tone. "But I can begin to see the figure of the wolf now; can you?"

"Yes, and she's standing over something that seems to move," the other replied.

"That must be the cubs; yes, listen to them

growl, would you? Young as they are they understand that an enemy is near. Ten to one the hair on each little back is standing up like bristles, right now. But seems to me we've gone about as close as we ought to, Aleck?"

Thad came to a halt. The light of the lantern showed them a dim, half crouching figure ahead. It was the mother wolf. Undoubtedly she might have found means of escape by retiring further into the place; but nothing would induce her to abandon her whelps. And Thad found himself obliged to admire this valor in the animal even though necessity compelled him to rid the country of pests by wiping out the entire brood of wolves, whelps as well as mother.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ALECK COMES INTO HIS OWN AT LAST.

"Do you think we're close enough, Thad?" whispered Aleck, as they bent forward, and strained their eyes to make out the dim gaunt figure that blocked all further progress, and which they knew full well must be that mother wolf.

"Yes," answered the other, in the same cautious tone; "if we went any further on, I'm afraid the beast would fly at us; and in that case you know, we'd have a harder time taking aim."

Thad had managed to set the lantern down on a level place, where, he hoped it would stand little danger of being knocked over, in case there was anything in the nature of a fight between themselves and the wolf.

This allowed him the free use of both his arms, which of course was the main idea he had in view, when getting rid of the lantern.

Of course Thad had never had any experience in thus entering the den of a wolf with young ones. All he knew about it he had heard from the lips of

others, or possibly read. Somehow, just then it flashed through his mind how history told of Israel Putnam, afterwards a celebrated general in the Continental Army, crawling into a wolf's den as a youth, and fetching the animal out, after a severe fight; but so far as Thad could remember, that was not a mother wolf; and Israel had an easy time compared to what it might have been under different conditions.

Well, there was their intended quarry; and with two guns to depend on, surely they ought to make quick work of the beast. The only difficulty about it was the treacherous light, for the lantern flickered in the draught; though until that critical moment Thad had paid no attention to this fact.

"Have you a bead on her head, Aleck?" he whispered; at the same time himself drawing his gun up to his shoulder and glancing along the double barrel; for Thad was of course carrying his Marlin with him at the time.

"Yes," came the answer.

"I'm going to count, slowly and evenly. When I say three, let go, Aleck!"

"I understand, Thad."

"All right. Hope we get her, sure. I'd hate to be bitten, or clawed by such a mad creature. Here goes, Aleck! One!"

"Yes."

"Two!"

A second passed, and then came the word:

"Three!"

It was drowned in a tremendous, deafening crash, as both guns were discharged so closely together that it made one report.

Thad of course had a second barrel to hold in reserve. He had more or less difficulty in seeing through the thin curtain of powder smoke that followed the double discharge; but at least no sprawling figure came flying at them, with snapping jaws that were eager to rend and tear.

"She's done for, Thad!" exclaimed Aleck, joyfully, as they heard a commotion beyond, and could see something moving with short jerks, like an animal kicking its last.

"Wait—hold on till I pick up the lantern; she may only be wounded, and get you, if you don't look out. Besides, those cubs are partly grown, and may be big enough to show fight."

Thad thus held his comrade back for a brief time until he could snatch up the light, and take his place in the van, which was really what he wanted to do.

As they approached the spot where a dark bundle lay, they could still see something of a movement.

"She isn't dead yet, I'm afraid, Thad," cried Aleck, who had a single-shot rifle, and was therefore without further means of defence until he

could find time to slip another cartridge into the chamber.

"Oh! I guess so," answered Thad; "what you see moving must be the whelps. Yes, I can see one right now, and he's a savage looking little beast on my word. We'll have to knock him on the head, Aleck. Wolves must be killed wherever they are found. Nobody ever spares them, Toby Smathers says. They're of no use at all, and do a great amount of harm, killing game and sheep, and even weak cattle in the winter season."

Aleck soon dispatched the growling cub with the stock of his gun, and then looked around for more.

"Do you expect that this was the only whelp?" he asked.

"Well, no, but the other must have escaped, somehow," replied Thad. "It doesn't matter to us, though, for the little beast will perish, without a mother to supply it food."

But although Thad never dreamed that such a small thing could have any bearing on their fortunes, it proved to be a fact, as would be shown before a great while.

"Shall we go on, now?" asked Aleck, after they had looked down on the big lean wolf that would never again hunt game in the passes and valleys of the Rockies; "I'm anxious to see what lies beyond, you know, Thad."

"Well, I don't blame you a bit, either, Aleck; in

fact, to tell the honest truth, I'm feeling somewhat that way myself, even if I haven't got the interest you have in the matter. So let's go right along. Have you loaded up again?"

"I'm just finishing now, Thad," came the reply.

Accordingly, the forward progress was resumed. Thad saw that they were rapidly drawing near what would likely prove to be a chamber of some size; and he anticipated that whatever was to be found would greet them here.

Just as he expected, a couple of minutes later they passed out from the tunnel which was a continuation of the fissure they had entered, and found themselves in a vaulted chamber. It was of some height, for the dim light of the lantern just reached the roof.

"Oh! what a strange place!" exclaimed Aleck, looking around with something like awe; "and to think that this was that my father saw that time. Do you expect this can be the silver lode, Thad?" and he pointed to the wall, where a broad streak of darkish ore cropped out.

Thad was no miner, but he had been interested in geology at school, and knew a little about the appearance of precious metals in their natural state.

"I don't doubt it one little bit, Aleck," he said, with a quiver to his voice. "And see here, you can tell that some one has pounded off pieces of the ore; why, I can even note where the hammer struck;

and on the ground small bits still lie, just as they fell years ago, when your father found his way in here, and made this grand discovery. Shake hands, Aleck! I want to be the first to congratulate you on finding the hidden mine again. You're a lucky boy, let me tell you. I'm glad for your sake, Aleck; and for that dear little mother who is thinking of you right now, no doubt."

"Thank you, Thad," replied the other, with a break in his voice, although it was joy that almost overcame him. "And what do I not owe to you, and the chums of the Silver Fox Patrol? For if you hadn't come to my rescue, when that scoundrel of a Kracker had me caged on that horrible little shelf of rock up the cliff, like as not I'd be there still, and ready to tell all to save my life."

"I don't believe that!" cried the scoutmaster, quickly. "I've seen enough of you to know you'd have died before you gave him what belonged only to your mother. And the chances are, you'd have found some way of getting down from there, when it came to the worst."

"Yes, fallen down, most likely, when they had made me so weak I couldn't look over without getting dizzy. But Thad, let's forget all that now, and look around here. How it thrills me just to think that dad found this mine so long ago, and that during these years it's remained hidden from all men; just as if something might be holding it

back until I grew old enough to come up here with that chart, to discover it again. Why, I can almost believe that *he* is here right now, and smiling his approval on my work; for he was a good dad, I tell you."

They prowled around for a long time, examining the walls of the chamber, and following up the wide lode of rich ore, until Thad, inexperienced as he was, could estimate that it must prove to be a very valuable mine, once placed in working condition.

"Here, let's both of us fill our pockets with specimens of the ore," the patrol leader remarked, when they began to think of once more seeking the exit, so strangely hidden from the eyes of any possible passer by; "like as not you'll want them, to convince some capitalist that you've got the goods, when making arrangements to sell a part of the mine, so as to get the money to work with."

"Yes, that sounds sensible," declared Aleck. "Dad did the same; and if he hadn't those specimens, nobody would ever have believed that he'd found anything worth while. And now, do we start back to the fissure in the cliff, Thad?"

"Might as well;" replied the other. "And while we're about it, let's drag out the dead wolves, so as to throw them in some hole where they won't bother any more."

"I wonder if that other cub came back; I'd

better make ready to knock it on the head, for it would die anyway, without a mother."

Aleck's voice had a catch in it as he said this, and Thad understood; the boy was thinking of his own mother, and how her prayers for his safety must have been the means of raising up for him such staunch friends as the scouts of the Silver Fox Patrol.

But when they came to the place where the animals lay they saw nothing of the other partly grown wolf. So Thad, having his gun and the lantern to manage, took charge of the offspring, while Aleck tugged at the big she wolf; and in this fashion they drew near the exit.

"Sh!"

It was Thad who uttered this low hiss of warning. His action was prompt in addition, for raising the lantern, he gave one sturdy puff, causing the flame to vanish.

Utter darkness surrounded them. Aleck had dropped the leg of the big wolf, and drew back the hammer of his rifle.

"Perhaps it was the other cub, Thad?" he whispered, as softly as the night wind creeps in and out of the trees, caressing each leaf as it passes on.

"No, it sounded more like voices!" came the equally low reply.

"Voices! Oh! do you mean men may be near

us?" gasped Aleck, a cold chill passing over him at the dreadful prospect of losing his long-sought patrimony just after finding it.

"It sounded like that Kracker; listen, and we'll soon know," Thad went on to say; and crouching there, the two boys waited for a repetition of the suspicious sound.

CHAPTER XXV.

CLOSE TO DISCOVERY.

When the sound of the voice came again even Aleck heard it plainly. Why, it seemed so very near that his first thought was that the men must have found the entrance to the treasure cave, and were pushing along the tunnel at that very moment. But on reflection Aleck realized that this could not be so, for the voice came from somewhere in the open air.

"I jest ain't agoin' any further, an' that's a fact. might as well rest up right here as keep on. I never was for comin' back, to spy on them ere scouts, but two agin one kerried the day. So here we be, tired in body, hungry, and nigh 'bout ready to drop. I say let's camp, and wait till mornin'."

"That's Dickey Bird," whispered Thad in the ear of his companion.

Aleck had had a load taken from his breast. Although the three men might be so close to the entrance of the mine that they could toss a stone into it, still it seemed only mere accident that

brought them here, and not design, or a suspicion as to the truth.

Another voice chimed in now, that of Kracker himself.

"Oh! as for that, I'm about as leg weary as you can be; and ready to rest up a bit. So Waffles, stir around, and gather some tinder to start a blaze. This night air is some cool, too. And say, I'm that hungry I could eat anything 'most. But with only one six-shot gun in the crowd, it's going to be hard lines to provide grub, I reckon."

"Then why'd you turn back, when we was all started for a place where we could git all the eats we wanted, with money to pay for 'em?" grumbled Dickey Bird.

"Why? Any fool could see that," retorted the big prospector, sternly. "Here I've been looking for this mine years and years, and it's got to be the one dream of my life to find the same. That boy knows; he's just been waitin' till he growed up big enough to start out. You saw how he acted, and said he'd die before he'd give up what belonged to his mother. That proves he's got the combination, either in his head, or somewhar about his clothes, which we couldn't find."

"Well," said the grumbler, "what good is that same agoin' to do us, now that he's in with that party of scouts, who say they'll stand up for him

right along? We ain't got no show, seems to me, Kracker."

"We ain't, hey?" replied the other, disdainfully. "Jest because you can't see anything before your nose, you say they ain't nothing doing. Let me tell you we never was nearer that same mine than we is now."

Thad felt his companion give a sudden start; he himself was wondering what these strange words of the prospector might mean; though he could not believe that the other could really suspect the presence of that fissure back of the vines.

"As how? Mebbe you wouldn't mind tellin' me, to ease up the pain in my legs; while Waffles, he's astartin' that ere fire?" Dickey Bird went on, skeptically.

"Sure thing," answered the big man who controlled the party of mine seekers. "If that boy does know the secret, he's going to open up while he's got them scouts to back him, ain't he? He'll want to feast his eyes on some of that same rich ore—that goes without saying. All right, let him, say I. We'll try and be close enough at hand to discover whar the pesky entrance lies; and while they're hangin' on up here, it's us to streak it for town and file a claim on that mine by description. First comer gets the persimmon every time. I ain't been in this line of business all my life without learnin' something."

Again did Thad feel his companion move restlessly. It was as though Aleck felt a sudden fear oppress him lest this sly old thief should yet get ahead in entering a claim for the mine.

The flicker of the kindling fire now began to show through the vines at the mouth of the opening. What if these men stayed there until morning, how were the boys to leave? Even when the moon stopped shining upon the face of the cliff, the light of the nearby fire would continue to light it up, so that they would not dare try and creep out. Such a movement, if seen or suspected by the campers, must arouse their curiosity, and lead to an investigation. Then the only thing that could save the mine for Aleck would be a hurried rush to town, in which they might be beaten by the others.

It was not a pleasant thought, although of course, if necessary, the boys could stay there without any great amount of privation. The constant chance of discovery would bother them much more than anything else.

Dickey Bird was still grumbling, it seemed. Things evidently did not please him at all, and only because the fear he entertained for Kracker, the man might have deserted the expedition.

"I jest don't like it around here, and that's what," they heard him say presently. "It ain't the nicest place agoin' either. Now what d'ye reckon that ere rumbling noise was, we all heard a while ago?

Waffles, he sez it was thunder; but they ain't nary a cloud as big as my hand anywhar 'round. Sounded more like earthquake noise to me. I was in that shake down at Frisco remember, an' ain't likely to forgit how it starts. If these here mountings began to roll over on us, we'd be in a nice pickle, now, eh? I tell you I don't like it any too much."

"Drop that kind of talk, Dickey Bird," ordered the big prospector, gruffly, "and draw up closer to the fire here. You're cold that's what, and things they looks kind of blue like. Get warmed up and you'll feel better. I've got a little dried meat in my knapsack, and we'll chew on that for a change."

"Good for you, Kunnel!" exclaimed the discontented one, whose mood probably had its inception in hunger, after all. "And don't be long about passin' that same around, will ye? I'm that nigh famished I could eat Indian dog, though I never thought I'd ever come to that."

The three prospectors sat down around the fire, and in order to overhear what they might say while they munched at the tough pemmican, Thad crept closer to the vine screen.

Something moved ahead of him, and he thought he saw the vines tremble, as though giving passage to some sort of body. Immediately afterwards there was a shout from one of the three prospectors,

and they could be seen scrambling hastily to their feet, showing every evidence of alarm.

"What is that coming this way?" roared Kracker.

"Say, looks like on'y a wolf cub, arter all!" declared Dickey Bird, with a catch in his husky voice, showing plainly how startled he had been.

"Well, now, that's just what it seems to be; knock the critter on the head, one of you," and the big man dropped back again to his seat.

It was Waffles who picked up a club, and jumping forward, hastened to wind up the earthly career of the motherless wolf whelp; though the savage little beast snarled furiously at his approach, and showed fight.

"Now I wonder what next?" remarked Kracker, as he watched the other engaged in a regular fight with the cub, which would not give up the ghost as easily as Waffles had evidently anticipated.

Indeed, the second man had to also arm himself with a club, and put in a few vicious blows before the wolf whelp was subdued.

"That's what comes to a man when he ain't got no gun!" complained Dickey Bird; from which remark it might be taken for granted that if there was only one revolver in the crowd, which the scouts had allowed them to retain possession of, Kracker had made sure to hold that.

"Oh! that was only a cub, and a wolf ain't any-

thing to be scared of!" remarked the big prospector; though he turned his head even while speaking, as though he fancied that he heard something moving in the bushes back of him, with visions of a red-eyed furious wolf mother coming to demand satisfaction for the killing of her offspring.

"Whar d'ye reckon the critter kim from now?" demanded Dickey Bird.

"Oh!" whispered Aleck, as though something warned him the danger point was getting very close now.

"First thing I see, he was acomin' away from the rock yonder," remarked Waffles, pointing straight at the hanging vines that screened the fissure so completely.

"Then it looks like he might a come out of them vines?" suggested Kracker, carelessly.

"Reckon, now, he did," replied the other.

"Go and take a look, Waffles," added the big man. "If so be we expect to sleep right here, we want to know if there's any wolf around. I ain't so fond of the ugly critters that I want to have one crawlin' all over me when I'm trying to get some rest. Look behind the vines, I say, Waffles, and make sure."

Waffles did not seem any too anxious to obey. Possibly, if he had gripped some sort of firearm in his hand, he might not have shown the same

timidity. Perhaps he too had an animosity toward ferocious and maddened wolves; and besides, it had been his hand that had given the finishing blow to that nasty little spitting cub, just now, and the mother wolf might have it in for him on that account.

But then he feared the scorn of the big prospector even more than he did the possibility of danger from a she wolf bereft of her whelps. And so, rather hesitatingly to be sure, the man started toward the cliff, with the intention of lifting the screen of vines, and peering behind the same.

Of course he would immediately learn of the fact that there was a fissure in the rock; and curiosity was apt to induce the men to make an attempt to explore the cavity, since they were all experienced miners, and eager to discover signs of a "find" in some unexpected place.

Closer came Waffles. He was now within a few feet of the vines, and indeed, had one hand stretched out, as with the intention of clutching the mass of vegetation, and drawing it aside; while the other gripped that stout cudgel, with which he expected to defend himself desperately, should he be attacked.

Aleck was quivering with suspense, and Thad could easily understand that he must be handling his gun, as though tempted to discharge this, and frighten the man off. But that would be giving the secret away, for these men were cunning; and after

they had come to figure things out, they would arrive at something like the truth.

If discovery were to be averted other means must be employed in order to keep Waffles from raising that curtain, or at least daring to venture into the fissure as much as one foot.

Finding the ear of his companion Thad managed to whisper in it the few words:

"Don't shout."

"Do just what I do; we've got to scare him!"

And Aleck pressed his arm, to let the scoutmaster know that he understood; even though the means to be employed might as yet be a mystery to him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CROW BOY'S HONOR.

Just as the prospector had started to draw the curtain of vines back, there came a most dreadful growl that made Aleck jump, under the belief that the she wolf he had been dragging after him, might have come back to life, and was about to pounce on the destroyers of her lair.

Then all at once it struck him that Thad must have been the cause of this savage growl; that was no doubt what he meant when he spoke so confidently of knowing a way to frighten the man off.

Indeed, Waffles did spring back instantly, uttering a cry of terror. He fully expected to see the beast that had uttered that ferocious growl come flying through the vine screen, leaping at his throat.

"What is it?" shouted Kracker, himself scrambling to his feet clumsily, owing to the girth of his waist.

He seemed to be dragging something out of a rear pocket, and no doubt this was the single weapon which the Boy Scouts had allowed the men to carry

off with them, at the time Kracker and his companions found it necessary to confess themselves beaten in the game of wits.

"A wolf is layin' behind them vines; didn't you hear her give tongue like sixty? Ketch me aliftin' anything thar, I tell you. Ugh! I ain't lost no wolf. Chances are it's the mother of that cub, too; an' she'll be that mad when she knows we killed it, nawthin' won't stop her rushin' the camp. Let's clear out of here?"

"But we got our fire started, an' all of us feel dead tired, too," complained Dickey Bird, who was evidently struggling between two opinions, and did not know which was the lesser evil—remain where they were, with that savage beast hovering around; or once more pursue their weary way elsewhere.

Kracker had approached close to the vines, and Thad thought it a good time to give another growl, which he did with new emphasis. And Aleck, not wanting to be left out of the game entirely, tried his hand also.

"Look out, Kunnel, thar's two of the critters!" shouted Waffles, turning and edging further away from the rock wall.

"A hull den of 'em, I reckons!" added Dickey Bird, who no longer cared to stay in such a dangerous vicinity.

Thad reached out his hand, and shook the vines violently. This action completed the demoralization

of the three prospectors. Almost weaponless as they were, they seemed to lack their ordinary courage.

"Run! they's comin' out arter us, Kunnel!" cried Waffles, suiting the action to his words, by turning and dashing wildly away.

The second man followed close at his heels, just as thoroughly demoralized. Kracker might have stood it out, for Kracker gripped a firearm in his fat hand; but when he found that he was being deserted by his companions, the big prospector also started to run clumsily away, breathing out all manner of threatenings against the other two for cowards.

Thad no longer growled, but lying there on the rocky floor of the fissure, he shook all over with half-suppressed laughter.

"That's the time we saved the day with our growls, Aleck!" he whispered, when he could control himself to some extent.

The other lad felt even more exultant. The mine had been in danger, but thanks to the ready wit of the scoutmaster, the enemy had been frightened away before they learned anything. And so Aleck, feeling that he had plenty of cause for rejoicing, soon joined Thad in soft laughter.

"No danger of those fellows coming back to investigate, do you think?" he asked.

"Well, if you could judge from the hurried way

they lit out, I guess we needn't dream that they'll ever want to see this cliff again," replied Thad.

"And when we want to, we can crawl out ourselves, can't we?" Aleck went on.

"Sure thing, right now is the time, because they're traveling for all they're worth, and never even looking back over their shoulders as they gallop along."

"How about these wolves; shall we drag them out, and throw the carcases away in some hole?" asked Thad's companion, evidently only too glad to do just whatever the scoutmaster decided were best.

Indeed, he had reason to feel the utmost confidence in Thad Brewster; from the very first this new friend had directed affairs in a way that Aleck looked on as simply wonderful. It was almost like a dream to him, the coming of these scouts, their championing his almost lost cause, and bringing success out of failure. No wonder then that Aleck felt so willing to trust this staunch friend through thick and thin. No wonder that he asked his opinion, knowing full well that whatever Thad decided would be best.

"Might as well get rid of the things while we're about it," was what Thad said. "Sooner or later you'll be entering this passage again, I hope with capitalists along with you to look the mine over, and decide how much money they'll advance to begin its

working; and you wouldn't find it nice here, if we left these bodies to cause a disagreeable odor. But we must be careful not to disarrange the vines. And I want to rub out any tracks we may leave, before quitting this place."

Accordingly both the mother wolf and the cub were taken outside. It was not a difficult thing to find a deep hole into which all of the dead animals could be cast; and after this duty had been accomplished the two boys returned to the mouth of the hidden mine.

The fire had been kicked under foot, and extinguished; though Thad afterwards made sure to place the embers in such a position that it would appear to have gone out of its own accord. This was to keep the prospectors from suspecting the truth, should they have the temerity to ever come back again, for one of them had lost his hat in his mad haste to depart.

Then lighting the lantern, Thad tried the best he knew how to smooth over any footprint he or his companion may have made close to the fissure in the rock. He wished Allan might be there just then, for he would have known how to go about it better.

"All right now," he announced a little later, as he arose from his knees.

"What had we better do, stay around here, or

try and work a little closer back to camp, to see what has happened there?" Aleck questioned.

"I was thinking it might pay us to do that last," the scoutmaster replied. "We needn't show ourselves, of course; but could hang around until your rascally old uncle and that sheriff went away. Now, if only it was some one else he wanted to nab, what a fine chance this would be for you to get him as an officer of the law to help you locate the mine. But I suppose that would be too dangerous."

"It's an idea worth thinking about," Aleck declared, "and we may find a way yet to carry it out. I hope we won't run across those three scared men, because they headed this way when they ran off. You don't mean to carry the lantern lighted, do you, Thad?"

"Well, I should say not. It would only advertise the fact that a couple of very fresh Boy Scouts were wandering around. Why, those very men might sight us and lie in wait to capture you again," with which Thad blew out the lantern.

They started on.

Thanks to the moonlight they were able to keep their course fairly well; sometimes under the low trees, and again among masses of piled up rocks. Far above their heads towered the mighty mountains, their tops capped with snow. Thad never glanced up at them without thinking how eagerly

he and his chums had looked forward to this chance for seeing the fortress Nature had built up and down the Western country, separating the Pacific Coast from the balance of the land.

"Listen!" said Aleck, laying a hand on his companion's sleeve.

"Did you think you heard a voice again?" asked Thad, whispering the words, for there was a spice of danger in the very air around them.

"I sure did; and there it is again. Whatever is that man doing?"

"Sounds to me like that Waffles?" suggested Thad.

"But what would he be praying for, tell me?" asked Aleck.

"Praying?" echoed the other, astonished himself.

"Well, listen to him, would you; he seems to be begging somebody not to hurt him? Do you suppose they've gone, and had a falling-out among themselves, and the colonel is threatening to finish his man for running away?" Aleck went on, still keeping his voice lowered.

"Why, hardly that, because he ran as fast as the rest of them," replied Thad. "But come, let's creep forward a little, and find out what all the fuss is about."

As they proceeded to do this, the sound of Waffles' peculiar voice came more and more plainly to their

hearing; and sure enough, he was certainly pleading earnestly with some unknown one.

"Think what a guy I'll be if so be ye do hit, and cut my pore ears off, jest in spite work?" he was whining; "I admit that I done ye dirt, when I hooked that bead belt from yer place, meanin' to sell the same. But shore I didn't know as how ye vallied it so high. Never'd a put a hand on it, if I'd been told 'twar a sacred fambly relic, and that outsiders hadn't orter touch the same. Let me go this time, Fox, and shore I promises never to do hit again. My ears is all I got, and think how I'd look without the same. Ye got me down, and I cain't help myself, ef so be ye mean to do hit; but better let me off this time. You ain't a wild Injun, and you knows it ain't doin' right to try and mend one wrong with another. Let me go, Fox; I'm asayin' I'm sorry, an' a man can't do more'n that."

The mystery was explained. The Fox had followed Thad and Aleck from the camp, no doubt with the idea of standing up for them, if they needed help. He must have been hovering near when the three prospectors started their fire, and witnessed all that happened afterward.

When the three frightened men made their wild flight, the Fox, still burning with a desire to wipe out the insult that Waffles had put upon his family when he took away that revered wampum belt that had never before been touched by profane hands,

had followed in their wake. Finding a chance to jump on the back of Waffles, he had borne the man to the ground. Doubtless the other two had continued their mad flight, never caring what would happen to Waffles, and only thinking of saving their own precious bodies.

And ever since that minute, the Fox had been sitting on the fallen man, telling him how he meant to punish him for his mean act, by making Waffles a reproach among his fellows, since only thieves have their ears sliced off in some countries.

Thad nudged his companion, and they started to creep closer to the spot where the two figures prone on the ground could be indistinctly seen.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TURN OF THE TIDE.

"HOLD on, Fox! that man has been punished enough; and besides you've recovered the belt, so there's been no real harm done. Let him get up!"

It was Thad who said this, as he and Aleck broke cover, and appeared before the astonished eyes of the two who were on the ground, the Crow boy flourishing his knife in a way calculated to make any one's blood run cold.

The Fox seemed to recognize that Thad spoke as one having authority. He had seen him manage things in the camp of the scouts, and noticed how willingly the rest of the boys recognized his leadership. And secretly the Crow boy admired Thad more than any paleface lad he had ever met on or off the reservation, saving possibly Aleck.

So he immediately arose, and hastened to conceal his knife.

"Give big scare, so him never try again!" he muttered, looking down.

"Don't ye believe him; he just meant to take my ears off, for a fact," exclaimed the man as he gained his feet, hardly knowing whether to start in running once more, or trust to Thad to stand between himself and the injured Crow boy.

"Well, then, we just happened along this way in time to save them for you; and Waffles, suppose you clear out of this as fast as you can. Don't forget what we said about shooting, if ever we found you around our camp. Now, if you get away in a hurry, I'll agree to keep the Fox beside me. Only if you know what's good for you, never go near the reservation again."

"Well, I never will, make up your mind to that. Hold him now; I'm going to skedaddle out of this on the jump!" and sure enough Waffles did, rushing away as only a good healthy fright could urge on a tired man.

Nor did any of them see him again, or either of the other two for that matter. They must have made up their minds that the region around there was unhealthy for fellows of their stamp, and that the sooner they turned their faces toward civilization the better for them.

Joined by the Fox, Thad and Aleck continued to walk toward the distant camp of the scouts further up the valley.

The night was getting well along when they halted to rest, having gone as far as was deemed

advisable. They had talked it well over, and the Fox had even told them what he knew about Sheriff Bob. This information was of so pleasing a nature that it seemed apt to have more or less influence with regard to making their final decision, as to what their plan should be in the morning.

They were up early, and had a bite to eat, a little food having been brought along by the far-sighted scoutmaster, who when he and Aleck cleared out, did not know when they would get back again.

Again they talked matters over. Thad was of a mind to betake himself back to the camp, leaving the others in hiding; but where they could see a signal he would make, if so be he wanted them to come in.

"This thing of your hiding out like you're a common criminal is all wrong," the scoutmaster had declared, somewhat angrily. "And I'm going to put it up to that sheriff in a way that must convince him he's been humbugged by your scheming old uncle. Then we can get him to go with us, to see you put up your notice, and claim the mine your father originally discovered. After that you can go with him to the place where you have to file your sworn declaration of entry, and have things all done according to law. The Silver Fox Patrol will meanwhile camp in front of that wolf den, and hold it secure for you! Understand all that, Aleck?"

"Indeed, I do; and no fellow ever before found such grand good friends as you and the rest of the scouts have shown yourselves to be to me," and as he shook hands with Thad, on the latter's leaving, Aleck had tears in his eyes.

"Oh! that's what scouts are for, you see; to be a help to each other, and to anybody that's in trouble, when they can lend a helping hand. Now, watch for the signal; for if I give it, you can feel satisfied you have nothing to fear from that sheriff."

With that Thad strode away, heading in a roundabout way for the camp, so that his coming from a certain direction might not betray the hiding-place of the other two.

Great was the astonishment of Allan, and those of the patrol who were in camp, when a lone figure was seen approaching that they quickly made out to be Thad. All sorts of possible sources of new trouble loomed up in their minds; but as the scoutmaster drew nearer, they were considerably relieved to discover that he was smiling, as though not worried in the least.

Of course the sheriff and Uncle Artemus had jumped up when the others did, and observed the coming of the young scoutmaster but with different emotions. The lawyer only wondered whether this might mean the surrender of his nephew to the authority invested in the office of sheriff; but the official himself was engaged in studying the approach-

ing lad, of whom he had heard so much, and drawing his own opinion with regard to his character.

"Glad to see you again, Thad!" called out Bumpus.

"That's right, and so says every one of us," echoed Giraffe, determined not to be left out of any talking-bee, if there was one.

Thad only nodded, and smiled. He walked right over to where Allan stood, and engaged him in earnest consultation; while the others looked on, not knowing what to make of this most unexpected turn of events.

Presently Allan turned and called out:

"Would you mind coming over here, Mr. Sheriff; we want to tell you something that ought to interest you, about this case?"

The shrewd lawyer tried to hang on to the coat-tails of the big sheriff, as he exclaimed, half threateningly, half pleadingly:

"Don't you go, Sheriff; they want to blarney you into believing their side of the story. You've got a warrant for the arrest of a vicious young fellow, even if he is my own nephew, who has robbed me of valuable papers. You've got to do your sworn duty! Better stay by me, and the pay'll be sure. I wouldn't mind doubling what I promised, if so be I get my papers back. And the boy can go hang, for all of me, then."

But the sheriff tore himself loose, and walked over to where the two earnest-faced scouts were awaiting him. Allan introduced him to the patrol leader, and from the hearty hand-clasp which the officer bestowed upon him, Thad felt sure that the case of poor badgered Aleck Rawson was as good as won, even before he had commenced to do any persuasive talking.

He began at the start, and related all that Aleck had told him of his troubles in the past; and how not only Kracker and his kind had annoyed the widow of the dead prospector, but this sly old lawyer as well, all of them imbued with the same mad desire to learn where the hidden mine was located.

He related numerous instances that almost amounted to persecution, whereby Uncle Artemus had tried to force the widow, through stress of poverty, to sell him the secret he believed she carried locked in her breast; until presently Thad saw by the angry glow in those blue eyes of the sheriff that he had accomplished the aim he had in view.

Meanwhile the old lawyer had been on needles and pins. He jumped up and sat down again half a dozen times. Of course he could easily understand that Thad was trying to wean the sheriff away from his duty; and there were signs that told Uncle Artemus this very thing was gradually being accomplished before his very eyes.

He could not stand it much longer, and finally he

advanced toward the spot where the sheriff and the two scouts stood.

Thad had no longer the slightest fear that his work would be undermined. He knew that Sheriff Bob would not longer lend his official stamp to any such underhand work as that which this "slick" lawyer from Denver was endeavoring to carry out. And so he could view the coming of the other without anxiety.

"I hope you haven't allowed yourself to be at all influenced by any specious story you've listened to, Mr. Sheriff," the old man started to say.

The officer drew his capacious hand across his chin, as though collecting his thoughts, in order to frame a suitable reply.

"I've been listening to some mighty interesting facts, Mr. Rawson," he said.

"Lies, every one of them, I warrant you, sir," snapped the lawyer, who began to feel that he was losing his grip on the case right then and there, since this little whipper-snapper of a leader among these boys appeared more capable of swaying the sheriff than he could himself do.

"Oh! I don't know about that, Mr. Rawson," the sheriff went on, his eyes losing some of their twinkle, and a steely look taking its place, which Thad understood must be his official face; "I know a heap more'n I did about things when I agreed to take this here warrant, and execute the same for

you, by arresting a lad you claimed was your nephew, which was true; and who had been stealing valuable papers from you, which I reckon was only a yarn."

"Do you mean to say you'd take the word of a mere half-grown boy rather than that of a gentleman, a lawyer of considerable repute in Denver, as you happen to know, Mr. Sheriff? Things have got to a nice pass when that can be."

"Listen!" thundered the sheriff, turning squarely on the astonished lawyer, and shaking his finger under his long nose; "you lied to me about all that valuable paper business. It was *you* that wanted to steal something you believed this lad carried about his person, a paper that would tell you where to find that hidden silver mine! And I was fool enough to believe you, and to be hoodwinked that way. A sheriff is sworn to do his duty *only* so long as he believes he is doing right; he has no claim to persecute an innocent party. I came all this way with you, though from the first I suspected you had a card up your sleeve, Mr. Rawson. Now understand it first and last, I consider myself no longer in your service. Not a cent that you promised me will I touch. I'm going to try and make amends to this poor son of Jerry Rawson for what I've done to worry him, by standing up and helping him take possession of his father's mine. He's found it too, because look at these specimens

of the richest silver ore I ever set eyes on. Understand that, sir?"

"But—you carry a warrant for his arrest!" bristled the lawyer, as a last resort.

The big sheriff pulled a paper out of his pocket, which he proceeded to tear into a score of fragments, laughing scornfully meanwhile.

"Do you see that, Mr. Rawson, sir? Now where's the warrant for arresting Aleck, your nephew? Call the boy in, Thad; I want to shake hands with him, and tell him Bob McNulty is ready to back him up in holding that mine. And he's got a whole lot to be thankful for, I tell you, boys, that when things looked darkest for him, a lucky chance, or some people would call it the favor of Providence, sent you scouts into this valley to camp. Not another word, Mr. Rawson, if you know what's good for you, sir!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GOOD-BYE TO THE ROCKIES—BOUND FOR HOME.

"THIS is Aleck Rawson, Sheriff McNulty," said Thad, some little time later, when, in answer to his signal, two figures came promptly into camp.

The officer greeted the boy warmly, and what he said caused Aleck's cheeks to burn red with delight, as well as his eyes to sparkle, as he turned them, filled with gratitude upon Thad; for it seemed to him the scoutmaster must be litle short of a magician, since he could even change enemies into warm friends.

Why, even Uncle Artemus, as if he knew enough to get in out of the wet when it rained, came up, and wanted to congratulate the boy for having won out, and found the mine his father had first set eyes on; but Aleck had too many bitter feelings in connection with the artful lawyer, and coolly turned his back on him.

Arrangements were soon made whereby the sheriff would go with Thad and Aleck that very day to see the mine, and be a witness to the act

whereby the son of the first discoverer laid claim to the valuable property. Then he said he would accompany Aleck to the city where the legal part of the business must be completed.

He also declared he knew the very capitalist, a man who was the essence of honor, and whom he would like to interest in the matter; so Aleck expressed a wish to meet him, that some arrangements might be quickly placed before his mother. His one thought seemed to be to get the glorious news to that waiting little woman as soon as possible. She had suffered enough, he declared; and please Heaven this would be the end, so far as money could bring relief.

On the following morning, then, the sheriff left, with Aleck and the guide keeping him company, and old Uncle Artemus "tagging on;" anxious now to get back to Denver, and take up his legal business, since his hopes of ever having a share in the newly-discovered silver mine were crushed, wrecked by his own malicious actions toward his brother's family. Had he done what was right in the premises, instead of greedily wanting to grab the whole, as Aleck put it, Uncle Artemus might have been the very capitalist needed to develop the mine; but no one had any faith in him any longer.

Of course Thad took his scouts, and made a permanent camp there, about where the three prospectors had started to settle down late on that night,

when the boys were coming out of the fissure in the rock. How the others did laugh, again and again, when they heard all about the fright given to Kracker and his companions, by the growls which Thad and Aleck managed to emit.

Of course the big-horn hunters had come in before that other day was much more than half done, and Smithy was proudly carrying the horns that had belonged to *his* quarry. He hardly seemed like the same Smithy they had known so long. Why, he was a transformed boy in many things, and even failed to brush off the dust some one pointed out to him on his khaki garments. And when Smithy reached a point that he could ignore such things, there must surely be a great transformation taking place in his make-up.

He was brim-full of questions now, eager to learn the thousand-and-one wrinkles of woodcraft, and expressing his determination to accomplish wonderful things before many months had passed.

And Thad knew that Smithy would prove a sad disappointment to all those thirty-seven old maid aunts and cousins who had spoiled him in the past; for he had suddenly discovered that he had the red blood of his father running in his veins; and the lure of all outdoors was beginning to take hold of him. Never again would that boy be satisfied to sit at the feet of an old lady, and learn how to make fancy-work; oh! no, after this, the baseball and

football fields would claim a goodly share of his attention; for Smithy was bent on making himself *manly,* a credit to the father whose name he bore, and who he knew had once dearly loved to hunt, and fish, and spend his vacations in the woods, close to Nature, as do all men who are worthy of the name.

Before the time limit which Thad and his chums had set for their stay in the haunts of the Rockies had fully expired, Aleck and the sheriff, accompanied by Toby Smathers, and several gentlemen who looked like financiers, came back. They had no sooner examined the mine than arrangements were immediately made for forming a company to open it. There was even talk about running a railroad spur up the valley from the nearest connection, so that the rich ore might be taken to a smelter, and stamping mills; though possibly it would be decided as an easier proposition to bring these things to the mine.

And so, one fine day, the Silver Fox Patrol of Cranford Troop of Boy Scouts said good-bye to Aleck and several others who had become their friends since arriving in that region, where the massive Rockies reared their snow-capped heads toward the blue skies, far outreaching the clouds at times.

Toby Smathers was to go back with them as far as the nearest town on the railroad; and then he

expected to return to the mine, having been offered a splendid position by the company. Aleck meant to go down and see his mother and sisters presently, when he could keep away no longer; and pour into their laps some of the first proceeds from the now newly-discovered, but long-hidden silver mine.

And later on Thad had long letters from the Western boy, in which he fully described the happiness that now reigned in his home; and again and again did that good little mother send her warmest regards to the brave lads who had been so instrumental in gaining this great fortune for the Rawsons, and to whom she must ever feel gratitude of the deepest kind on account of having her son spared to her.

Of course we shall expect at some future time to once more make the acquaintance of Thad Brewster and his jolly lot of chums belonging to the Silver Fox Patrol. With the advent of the new patrol, and other lads still clamoring for admittance into the troop, Cranford was apt soon to take a front rank, as a town where the boys were organized for good. And when so many enterprising lads as Allan, Step Hen, Giraffe, Bumpus, Bob Bob White, Smithy, Davey Jones, and last, but far from least, the efficient assistant scoutmaster himself, Thad Brewster, continue to get together at every available opportunity, winter and summer, bent on having a royal good time, it may be set

down as certain that lots of remarkable things are just bound to happen, that would make splendid reading.

But for the present we will have to let Bumpus take his bugle in hand, and in his customary clever way sound "taps," lights out.

THE END.